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or

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Thy better strength shall prove therein more strong,
Thy way leading no light to lead astray."

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VOL. VI.

I V O R S

OR

THE TWO COUSINS.



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I V O R S.

CHAPTER I.

THE library at Ivors, the country seat of Sir Henry Clare, was a large, low, luxuriously furnished apartment, by no means devoted exclusively to study, but offering amusement to the morning idler and interest to the lover of art, as well as occupation to the more thoughtful student of science or philosophy. Tables there were in profusion, of every shape and size: the ponderous, square, business table, with its massive inkstand, large writing portfolio, and profuse supply of paper, pens, and envelopes; the long sofa-table, with the newest novels and reviews, tempting the reader to ensconce himself in the easy chair at the corner, close to the window, and forget his own cares in the joys and sorrows of fiction; the small work-table, which, like the tent of the wandering Arab, was carried from place to place, and never known to retain the same position for more than an hour at a time; the print-table, piled with valuable books, which every one wished to look at, but which no one did, because they were too weighty to be moved; above all, Lady Augusta Clare's table, oval-shaped, heavy, handsomely carved, very old-fashioned, standing in the deep recess opposite to the fireplace, its crimson covering nearly hidden by the collection of papers, cards, letters, sketch-books, club-books, foreign books, pamphlets, albums, and patterns of work, which clustered round a magnificent vase of Bohemian glass filled with rare flowers.

"A very habitable room," was the common expression used in describing the library at Ivors. Though low, it was bright and sunny. A large modern window at one end fronted the south, and opened upon a flower-garden, brilliant in summer with the

gorgeous colouring which nothing but nature can give ; Lady Augusta's window also, though darkened by heavier mullions, admitted the full rays of the morning sun, and gave lovely glimpses of rich foliage and pleasant country lying beyond the circle of the park. If beguiled by the love of reverie, one might have sat for hours on the cushioned window-seat, forming romances out of the vistas of deep glades, and the occasional openings amongst the trees into the working world beyond ; — its cottages, and spires, and the smoke of a distant town. But reverie was not the habit of mind most cherished by Lady Augusta Clare. Now, as she sat writing, with her face turned from the window, it would have seemed, from the expression of her countenance, its eager, restless look, that she could have no leisure even for quiet admiration, much less for reverie. Lady Augusta's appearance was very striking. Her countenance was handsome ; the forehead high, and open ; the eye dark, quick, and glittering ; the mouth perhaps rather large, but showing beautifully even teeth : her figure was tall, her attitude graceful, her dress perfect in its tasteful simplicity. Why was it that the eye rested upon her with only a doubtful pleasure ?

She finished her letter, pushed it aside, and, rising slowly, advanced into the centre of the room.

"Shall you be ready for your drive, Admiral ? It is nearly three o'clock,"

The question was addressed to an old, grey-haired man, with a bluff, honest, rather stern face, who was leaning forward in a heavy arm-chair, his hand resting upon the head of a little girl about ten years of age, whilst she sat reading a book of fairy tales in an uneasy position on one corner of the stool which supported the Admiral's gouty foot.

"Helen, Mademoiselle will be waiting for you ; you had better go to her," continued Lady Augusta ; and Helen rose instantly.

"Reached the best part of the story, eh ?" asked the Admiral, gruffly.

"Not the best, quite. If I might only go on !" The child held the book still open.

"What book is it ?" Lady Augusta took it from her.

"Nonsense, I dare say," said the Admiral ; "little folks read nothing else in these days."

"It will do no harm," replied Lady Augusta ; one "must give the imagination some food, and books are safer than people."

"So they say."

His manner was doubtful enough to be irritating to Lady Augusta's self-confidence: she answered sharply, "They must be, unless one can choose society, which is impossible in a country neighbourhood."

"Umph."

"That means you don't agree; but, my dear Admiral, begging your pardon, you can't possibly know as much as I do of the matter. Live with us for six months, and then judge if you will."

"I don't want to judge; I always bow to your Ladyship's better opinion:" but the old man's tone was too sarcastic for Lady Augusta to accept the compliment.

She went on eagerly: "You will soon see that our neighbours are quite commonplace, with no intellect,—mere ordinary worldly people,—many of them really not admissible to one's house,—and so set up,—with such absurd pretension! Sir Henry tried when we first came, but we really found it was no use; and now,"—and she glanced at Helen,—"With the child old enough to make her own observations, it really is a paramount duty to be careful."

The "child's" quick-speaking, hazel eyes, were fixed upon Lady Augusta. Not a word, look, or gesture was lost upon her.

"Very likely," continued the Admiral; but what "very likely," meant was not quite clear.

Lady Augusta stood like an orator bent upon arguing, and all the more eloquently because the opposition was felt rather than expressed. "Of course, my dear Admiral, we all have but one object in view,—right principle; the question is how is it to be attained?"

"Aye, yes!" nodded the Admiral,—whilst Lady Augusta continued impatiently,—

"I am sure I have studied the question thoroughly, read, and thought, and talked with every one likely to give me the least help; and I find that all whose opinion I really value agree with myself."

The Admiral's lip curled,—but it might have been only from the amusement of watching Helen's intent look, as she stood by the table, her finger resting on the page which a few moments before she had been so anxious to finish.

"Evil, evil,—one so dreads evil!" Lady Augusta's voice sank into a minor key.

"It is time for Helen to go for her walk, isn't it?" asked the Admiral.

"Yes, certainly; go child!" but Helen did not move.

"We quite agree, my dear Admiral, I know, in fundamentals; I only wish I could make you see with my eyes: but men, begging your pardon, are so blind; they don't perceive the things which a woman's instinct feels in a moment. Sir Henry would persuade me, if he could, to let Helen mix more freely with her cousins and their friends at Wingfield; but he does not at all think what difficulties we should get into in consequence. Mrs. Graham, we all allow, is an admirable person, and her acquaintances are no doubt very good in their way, but they are not the stamp of people for Helen to associate with. I wish to bring her up simply, with all the pure freshness of nature, uncontaminated by intercourse with the world."

A fresh-coloured, good-humoured face appeared in the doorway, and a voice, pitched in a high, harsh key, was heard: "*Viens! mon enfant, viens! Ah! que tu es paresseuse.*"

"Mamma, may we go into the village?" asked Helen, without even turning to look at her French governess.

"No, my love, no. *Mademoiselle*,"—the governess advanced timidly, as if stepping upon sacred ground,—"*I wish you to keep within the limits of the park. If Miss Clare should desire at any time to go into the village, I will take her there myself.*"

Helen sprang forward, and put up her face caressingly to be kissed. "I don't want to see the tiresome village people; only perhaps Susan may be coming here, and I might meet her."

Lady Augusta looked annoyed, and gave no kiss. "You are so impetuous, Helen; you have no self-control. I shall not take you any where unless you can command yourself." Helen drew back to the side of her governess, and whispered, "Dear *Mademoiselle*, don't let us be out long." *Mademoiselle* smiled, and shook her head. "Two hours, you know, we must be."

Helen pouted, and muttered that it was going to rain; she thought it did rain; she wished it would rain every day; she hated the park.

"You can study botany there, child," said the Admiral. He spoke to Helen, but he looked at Lady Augusta.

"Helen will study to be a good child, and not give trouble," replied Lady Augusta quickly; and as she rang the bell to order the carriage Helen and the governess retired.

CHAPTER II.

LADY AUGUSTA CLARE was a woman of systems. She had been brought up upon no plan herself; her mind therefore was unshackled by early prejudice, and at liberty to form its theories at will. She possessed a fair amount of quickness of intellect, with a more than average amount of physical and mental energy. These are not the materials for happiness in the gay and frivolous world; and, as Lady Augusta Mordaunt, her life had been a disappointed one. An only daughter, young, handsome, and rich, she was courted and flattered by society, yet it failed to satisfy her; and by the time she was thirty she had formed systems for its reconstruction, discussed with metaphysicians, and drawn forth in long and wordy manuscript essays, which, if they did not tend to convert her friends to her opinions, at least convinced herself that she was too superior to run any risk of being converted by them. In a fit of disgust, the mania of usefulness attacked her. She became the patroness of innumerable benevolent institutions; but all were found to be based upon some fundamental error. Lady Augusta set herself to reform them, and found no one willing to co-operate with her. If the world would not be charitable in her way, she could not be charitable in the world's way; and she fled to science as a refuge. But here there was an *embarras de richesses*,—not one system, but many. Lady Augusta's mind was in perpetual agitation; one theory after another was adopted, idolised, proved, and found defective, and thrown aside. The old weariness was returning, when, happiness unlooked for! at the age of forty a new interest presented itself,—the grand interest—the grand problem of the nineteenth century,—education, and in a form most attractive to a person who had for years been seeking in vain for an object on which to expend all the superabundant energy of her character.

Sir Henry Clare, a widower, offered himself, his income of ten thousand a year, his seat in the country, his house in town, all for Lady Augusta's acceptance, with only the drawback of the care of two children, a boy of twelve, generally at school, and so not likely to be in the way, and a little girl of seven, who was, of course, to be educated at home. Sir Henry himself might have been refused, though he was an honest-hearted, upright, English gentleman. Lady Augusta had declined many more advantageous offers, for her theories in early life had been anti-matrimonial, and Sir Henry was not likely to prove a very sympathetic companion;

but the little girl—just the age for education, the mind just opening, the feelings fresh, the taste untutored—it was an opportunity for usefulness which might never again occur; it seemed actually wrong to refuse; the poor child might fall into such bad hands; having no mother, her situation would be so forlorn. Lady Augusta, without much difficulty, thought herself into the belief that the fact of the offer being made was the suggestion of a paramount duty, and, after due delay, and consideration of responsibilities, and self-pitying sighs, consented to become the mistress of Ivors Park and the stepmother of little Helen. That she was also the wife of Sir Henry Clare was rather the accident of such circumstances than the cause.

Lady Augusta Mordaunt had been a cold, hard, harsh-mannered, yet not altogether worldly woman. Lady Augusta Clare was as cold, but more gentle,—less worldly in appearance, more worldly in reality. She had found her object in life, and so far she was satisfied; but her marriage had begun in self-deceit, and in self-deceit it continued. She had professed to marry Sir Henry Clare because she could love, honour, and obey him. She married him in fact because she wanted occupation, and independence, and the excitement of a new mode of life. That one great falsehood tainted her whole character. Whatever she might have been before, she was at least sincere—her mania had been for the time real; now she was acting a part—good, indeed, in the eyes of the world, often involving self-sacrifice, and always demanding thought and exertion, but not the less surely tending to the degradation of the moral tone.

Lady Augusta had entered upon her married life with the determination to be an exemplary step-mother, yet far less because she felt the duties of her position than because it would be an honour to triumph over its difficulties. It was an opportunity for testing her theories, and she rejoiced in it, and, to a certain extent, not without cause. At the time of her marriage, little Helen was a wild, wilful, untamed child of the woods, utterly untaught in all the proprieties of life, very ignorant of what most children of her age know perfectly, yet having acquired information upon other subjects which were likely to be worse than useless. In three years' time Lady Augusta had subdued her into good manners and docility, brought out her natural talents, cultivated them to the admiration and surprise of her friends, taught her to be a pleasant companion to her father, in fact made her, as she was often reminded by flattering acquaintances, "quite another creature." Surely here was cause for triumph, and Lady Augusta did triumph, with that quiet self-applause which so

comfortably expands itself under the veil of humility. "Certainly dear little Helen was much altered," she would often say; "her efforts had been wonderfully blessed, but there was a great deal still to be done, she felt herself sadly unequal to the arduous task:" and then dear little Helen was called up, and caressed, and sighed over, and sent back again to her book, whilst Lady Augusta discussed in her hearing the system upon which she had determined to educate her.

Simplicity, ignorance of evil, a mind which should suffice for its own amusement and occupation, refinement of taste, religious principle—all these were in the category of Lady Augusta Clare's educational intentions. And as her aim for herself was high, so was she eloquent in condemnation of the systems pursued by her friends, and lynx-eyed in the discovery of their failures. Scarcely one child of her acquaintance but had in its turn been mourned over, as "a poor little thing, of whom so much might have been made but for the sad education!" Of course when people find fault with their neighbours it is to be supposed that they can, and are doing, better themselves. The world is always for a time, led by assumption; and Lady Augusta by dint of constant lamentations over the short-comings of her friends and judicious hints of Helen's rapid improvement, had obtained a wonderful reputation for her own plan. In what it consisted no one indeed exactly knew, for Helen was rarely seen beyond the limits of the park; and all communication between the French governess and any families in the neighbourhood was strictly forbidden. Lady Augusta's great fear was said to be lest her little girl should form undesirable acquaintances; a vague fear, commented upon in the adjoining town of Wingfield, and declared to be only another form of pride. But the friends admitted to intimacy at Ivors agreed with Lady Augusta that such exclusiveness was only necessary. With her system, her dread of evil, her determination to bring Helen up simply, without pretension or absurdity, it would not be possible to throw her amongst ordinary people; they would infallibly ruin her: and the little coterie from the gay London world gathered round their oracle, listening and applauding, whilst, from the height of her supreme self-complacency, Lady Augusta discoursed upon the errors of the common herd, and thanked God that Helen would never be like them.

In one respect Lady Augusta was right. Helen certainly never could be a common person. Her growth was as likely to be rapid in evil as in good; but grow she must, with the hot-bed luxuriance of a tropical plant.

Her mother had been the grand-daughter of a Spanish nobleman; and the proud, excitable Spanish spirit was as clearly to be traced in Helen's disposition as in the flash of her dark eyes and the outline of her otherwise fair English face. Probably no temper but one so determined as that of Lady Augusta would have been able to cope with it, and the struggle had at first been sore even for her. Fierce in her wilfulness, Helen had tried every childish means of intimidation whenever her will was thwarted; and in the nursery and with her governess she was constantly victorious; but with her step-mother it was but beating her head against the impassive rock. Lady Augusta seldom answered her in her fits of fury, never attempted to reprove, still less to coax or pet; but her cold eye had the effect of the glance of a keeper upon a madman. Helen was quelled for the moment, and dreaded to encounter it again, and soon learnt in Lady Augusta's presence to subdue even the most stormy burst of passion.

Beyond this there was only one thing which Lady Augusta could discover which required correction. Learning was no difficulty; accomplishments seemed an instinct; beauty and grace were Helen's inheritance by birth: but it was difficult at first to keep her from rebelling against the restraints imposed upon her as regarded society. Lady Augusta, however, set to work vigorously. Nurse, governess, servants, all were changed. Playfellows were forbidden: walks were limited to the precincts of the park; the contaminating influence of the world was the subject constantly discussed in Helen's presence; and criticisms were passed upon the manners and habits of various individuals which it was supposed would tend to form Helen's taste and counteract the mischief of early associations and natural temperament. For Helen was not by nature supercilious. Proud, indeed, she was; but it was pride which regarded herself rather than others, the pride which could not brook reproof, which would not own itself in the wrong. Apart from this feeling she was generous, compassionate, unselfish, enthusiastic in the depth and warmth of her feelings. If her affections were touched, she could be made gentle and docile in her most wilful moods. And in her infancy she had loved every one. Her father, her nurse, her governess, the housekeeper, the poor who begged for alms, the children who played in the village, whatever came within the reach of her interest, even though but for a passing moment, called forth some kindly feeling. No marvel that she had been petted and fondled, and when left, at three years of age, to the care of servants, often taken into strange company and taught

habits unsuited to her age and position in life. The little rosy mouth which formed itself so naturally into a kiss, the bright eyes, with their loving, quick, sparkling glance, which responded so gladly to the least notice, the broken words which tried to express the feelings of the heart, as the tiny fingers were grasped by some rough hand, were as winning to the poor as to the rich, to the uneducated as to the cultivated. Until her father's second marriage Helen Clare had been the pet of the neighbourhood, and had suffered as pets must suffer.

Three years had been passed under constant and strict surveillance, and the mischief was supposed to be counteracted. Helen's eyes were opened to the necessity of exclusiveness, and she could talk now as fluently in the school-room as Lady Augusta in the drawing-room of the demerits of "everybody,"—the expression including the country visitors whom she occasionally saw in the drawing-room, or in walks or drives. Once admitted to stay at Ivors, and the fortunate individual, however dull or disagreeable, became "somebody," to be defended and upheld as forming part of the Clare world.

Lady Augusta was satisfied. The childish warmth of feeling which had once expended itself upon the outer world was gradually becoming concentrated within the range of the park palings; and she flattered herself that she had refined her little girl's taste and taught her to be happy at home, because she had led her to look with contempt upon everything abroad.

All this may seem very worldly, yet Lady Augusta Clare's reputation was decidedly religious. Even in her gayer younger days she had never been a thoughtless person. When she followed science it was always with a professed leaning towards its highest objects; and latterly she had taken a more prominent part in religious matters, studied controversial books, entered warmly into the questions of the day, filled her book-shelves with manuals of devotion, ornamented her walls with prints from Raphael and Fra Angelico. And Helen was of course taught upon what were said to be the strictest and purest principles. Her little bedroom was the counterpart of Lady Augusta's. It had pictures, and books most admirably arranged, and hymns framed and glazed, hanging against the wall, and a splendidly bound Bible always lying upon the dressing-table by the side of little Bohemian glass vases, and a gorgeous dressing-case made up of rosewood, and silver, and velvet. Helen delighted in her little room, and was never happy till she had shown her pictures to every new visitor; and had an opinion always ready as to her favourite books, and

was willing to repeat her hymns to any one who would listen to and praise her. As Lady Augusta observed, "it was quite delightful to see such marked religious tastes so early developed!"

And what part was taken by Sir Henry Clare in all these educational schemes? Immersed in politics, the conservative member for the county for the last ten years, he thought very little about them. He had married, as he believed, for his children's advantage; he had given them a step-mother, said by all the world to be perfectly qualified to guide them; and he thought that he had done his duty. His boy at Eton, his little girl trained by such a superior person as Lady Augusta, there seemed nothing to desire, at least for the present; and Sir Henry looked forward to seeing his son a sensible man, and his daughter a good and accomplished woman, as confidently as the iron-founder who casts his metal into the furnace expects to receive it again impressed with the stamp prepared for it.

Sir Henry Clare's expectations were reasonable. The minds of our children are formed according to the mould which we ourselves prepare for them. But the iron-founder knows his object, and chooses his mould with a careful view to its attainment: we, in our ignorance, think that we are working with the right mould, because we talk, and reprove, and lecture; and at the very moment we are casting the wrong one, by the habits of our daily life, and the unseen motives of our actions.

CHAPTER III.

"SHALL you object to drive into Wingfield, my dear Admiral?" asked Lady Augusta, when, after a careful adjustment of pillows, the gouty foot had been placed in a comfortable position, in the easy, open carriage, and the Admiral's man had taken his seat upon the box.

Admiral Clare was Sir Henry's uncle, a man of seventy, rich, benevolent, eccentric; likely to be a very useful relation—so Lady Augusta thought,—if he were properly humoured. He had just returned from a long residence abroad, and had been only a week at Ivors. His peculiarities, therefore, were as yet for the most part in the "unknown land," which forms so large a portion of our moral territory even in our own eyes; and Lady Augusta was constantly setting forth on little voyages of discovery

in the hope of finding them, and as constantly missing when she expected to meet them, and stumbling upon when she was not prepared for them. She had tried for three days to make out to her own satisfaction whether the Admiral had any fancy about his daily drive, whether he preferred one direction to another,—whether he liked the town and a little shopping, or the turnpike road, or the smooth turf of the downs. He was provokingly willing to go wherever she wished,—he would not give her the opportunity of flattering him; and Lady Augusta, having received the usual short answer to her question, “Wherever you will, it is all the same to me,” gave her direction to the footman, and threw herself back in the carriage, looking as cross as she ever allowed herself to look. Temper was a failing especially guarded against,—it was so lowering.

After a few seconds she recovered herself. “I was half afraid you would find the dust unpleasant, Admiral; but you are very enduring.”

“Not much dust to-day, except in your Ladyship’s eyes. There was rain enough for a deluge last night.”

“Ah! I forgot; but we have had such a continuance of dry weather. It will take a long time really to soften the ground. And don’t you find the heat extremely oppressive?”

“Nothing to Italy. Did you say you were going to drive to Wingfield?”

“I thought of it, if you have no other visit; but any direction will be the same to me; we can stop directly.” Lady Augusta stretched out her hand to pull the check-string; the Admiral prevented her.

“My dear lady, one road is just as good as another to a gouty old fellow like me. If you are going to Wingfield, I propose to leave my card on Mrs. Charles Graham, as she came to see me the day before yesterday.”

Cloud the second,—a thunder cloud on Lady Augusta’s brow; but she turned away her face that it might not be seen, and answered: “Mrs. Graham now; the poor elder brother died last year.”

“So she told me; then she has something for her children at last.”

“A little,—three or four hundred a year only,—a mere pittance. I suspect she settled here, thinking that Sir Henry would do something for her.”

“Of course; she is his sister-in-law.”

“Yes! of course; but still—Sir Henry has great claims upon him. He can’t be expected to provide for them all.”

"Does the good woman expect that he will?"

Lady Augusta laughed graciously, and turned her head again to the Admiral. "You have used just the right term for her, my dear sir; she is emphatically a good woman."

"And she can't be anything better; but is she fool enough to depend on any one but herself?"

"I can't exactly say: Frances Graham was always immensely reserved; and since my marriage there has seemed, strange to say, a barrier between us; but she is very good, extremely good; I don't know a better person, and so like her dear sister; my little Helen's mother;"—and Lady Augusta adopted the mournful key, and breathed out the last words as a whisper to the winds.

"Does Helen see much of her Aunt?" inquired the Admiral.

"Well! not much,—not so much as I should wish. The fact is, my dear Admiral, between ourselves,"—the Admiral drew back as Lady Augusta's face approximated to his,—“between ourselves, Helen is a very serious charge, and I am obliged to be most careful. I could not speak out openly to-day with the child in the room,”—the Admiral bit his lip, and leaned forward upon his stick,—“but you would be quite surprised to hear all that goes on in this neighbourhood.”

"Most likely," muttered the Admiral, "it's the case in most neighbourhoods."

"Yes, as you say, it is so in most neighbourhoods; I suppose this is not worse than others; but in Helen's peculiar position, I feel that I have such a sacred charge. Perhaps, if she were my own child, I might feel the responsibility less: and Mrs. Graham and I do not, I must candidly own, quite meet in our views of education. She has three girls, very amiable; the eldest half a year older than Helen. They see each other sometimes, the relationship makes it a matter of necessity; but I can't help being anxious about it. Mrs. Graham allows them a good deal more freedom than I can think right."

"She was kept strictly enough herself," observed the Admiral.

"Was she?" the tone was one of supreme indifference. "I know nothing about her early days. We never became acquainted till I met her at Ivors some six years ago. Certainly she brings up her children on the contrary system."

"A common case," said the Admiral.

"I suppose so; probably you are right; but you can understand that style of education does not suit my ideas for Helen. It may be all very well for children like the Grahams, who can never expect to mix in superior society; but it would be quite unfitting for Helen in her position."

"What is her position?" asked the Admiral, bluntly.

Lady Augusta looked at him doubtfully, and paused.

The question was repeated.

"Her position? my dear sir, you are laughing at me. I won't attempt to explain it; but you can't possibly put her on a par with the Grahams."

"Cousins," said the Admiral.

"Oh, yes, cousins. But relationship is not every thing."

"Nor any thing, if relations are poor."

Lady Augusta saw in an instant that she was moving in a wrong direction, and changed her course.

"My dear Admiral, you quite mistake me, if you think that the question of poverty has any thing to do with the matter. I should always feel, and so would Sir Henry, that poor dear Mrs. Graham was to be treated with every consideration; but if you once knew the tone of the house, you would feel directly that great intimacy would not do. The Graham children are by no means particular in their acquaintance. I could not at all answer for the friendships Helen might form, if she were to go there. Susan Graham, I know, is allowed to go about a good deal at Wingfield, amongst people whom, of course, we could never visit. I assure you it would not do."

"People you can't visit," muttered the Admiral. "Very wrong that! I shall talk to Frances Graham about it."

"Oh! my dear sir, pray—I entreat you—not for the world. She would never forgive me." Lady Augusta seized the Admiral's hand in her alarm.

He drew it away. "Your ladyship will excuse me. Frances Graham was my ward; if she is bringing up her children wrongly, it is my duty to warn her. People you could never visit!" he repeated again in an under tone.

"You are so exact, Admiral," and Lady Augusta laughed rather nervously. "There is no physical or moral impossibility. They may be very good people, but unrefined, homely, not at all what Helen is accustomed to. And she is sweetly simple and natural; I would not for the world have her spoilt."

"Neither would I," said the Admiral; and he sank back in the carriage, laid his stick across his knees, and did not speak again.

They were just entering Wingfield. It was market-day, and there was an unusual bustle in the High-Street; but Lady Augusta looked straight before her, and only once bent forward to bow to Mr. Conyers, the surgeon whom she could not with

courtesy avoid. In a few minutes they had reached the further end of the town, and the carriage drew up before an iron gate, which opened upon a gravel sweep, in front of Mrs. Graham's house, Wingfield Court, built of red brick, with stone facings, and standing in a garden of moderate extent. The great house it was of the country town, though, in Lady Augusta's eyes scarcely more than a cottage.

"A comfortable place enough," said the Admiral.

"Very fair." Lady Augusta felt so extremely cross, it was next to impossible not to show it.

"And kept in capital order," said the Admiral casting around his quick quarter-deck glance.

"Tolerable."

"A splendid fuchsia, that! I don't think you have any at Ivora to equal it."

Lady Augusta saw that he was bent upon teasing her, and it roused her into seeming good-humour. She would not be thwarted in that way at least, and to the Admiral's surprise she entered fully into the merits of the fuchsia, and was at the climax of exuberant praise, when the tidy parlour-maid opened the front door of Wingfield Court, and gave the information,—welcome certainly to Lady Augusta,—that Mrs. Graham was not at home.

The Admiral drew out his card, — a small card inscribed with large Roman letters,—and wrote some thing on the back.

"Is your mistress out generally at this hour?" he asked.

"Most days, sir; she goes out from three to four now it's hot, and walks with the children afterwards."

"Too much exercise for this weather," said the Admiral.

"Tell her I said so."

"It's to the school, I believe my mistress is gone, sir," said the maid, who looked inclined to be communicative.

"Oh! to the school. Too hot for that too! tell her she will catch a fever."

The maid smiled, and Lady Augusta asked patronisingly, yet rather sarcastically, if Miss Susan was at the school too.

"Miss Susan went across the paddock just now, to Mrs. Lowrie's, I believe, my lady."

"And the little ones—where are they?"

"Nurse was going to take them to see old Miss Harvey, I believe, my lady. Master Charlie is fretful, cutting a tooth, and she thought it would please him to talk to the parrot."

"Oh! drive on." Lady Augusta appealed eagerly to the Admiral. "Just what I said, my dear Admiral; you will under-

stand perfectly now. I could not possibly let Helen be mixed up with such people. That old Miss Harvey, I fancy, is a rich farmer's daughter, and the nurse evidently takes the children there without scruple. A most unaccountable system ! ”

The gravel sweep was rather rough, and the wheels of the carriage made a considerable noise. Perhaps the Admiral did not hear. He was bending forward, but suddenly seized the check-string. “ I beg pardon, but may I be allowed—— ” and before Lady Augusta could speak, the carriage was stopped.

“ That's a Graham, I am sure. ” He beckoned to a little girl about Helen's height and size, who was just entering the sweep.

“ Such a little figure ! ” muttered Lady Augusta ; but the exclamation was too low for the Admiral to hear.

The child certainly was not quite prepared for fashionable society. Her cotton dress was tumbled, and betokened the last days of the week ; and the close linen bonnet made to screen her from the sun nearly hid her features. She stood timidly at a distance, even after the Admiral's sign was given ; and only ventured to draw near when Lady Augusta condescendingly put out her hand, and said, “ How d'ye do, Susan ? ”

A slight quaintness, at least for the manner of the present day, might have been remarked in the quiet “ Very well, thank you, ma'am, ” which came in reply ; and Susan Graham's cheeks were crimson with shyness and excitement, as she added, “ If you please, how is Helen ? ”

“ Helen is very well, my dear. She would have sent her love if she had known I was coming here. ”

A pause. The coachman looked round to know if he should drive on. Lady Augusta was upon the point of giving the order, but she did not venture.

The Admiral's eye was fixed upon the gentle blushing little face, only partially seen at the extremity of the deep cottage bonnet. Lady Augusta could not read his countenance ; but she had sufficient tact not to interrupt his train of thought, whatever it might be.

Poor old man ! His mind was recalling a common tale, — a memory of early love, — so long gone by that its truth and beauty were faded to all eyes except his own. But it was quite fresh to him ; and little Susan Graham was the picture of the child whom, sixty years before, he had known and loved with a boyish fancy, — whom it had been the hope of his manhood that he should one day call his wife, and who, even when she became the bride of

another, was revered with a feeling which made him look upon her happiness as his comfort, and her children, at least in their early days, as, in a great measure, his charge.

Lady Augusta was wise not to interrupt him. It was but a short reverie; and he roused himself from it, and, addressing her as if conscious of some unlooked-for consideration, said almost gently, yet with a curious abruptness, "She is her grandmother's image; don't they say so?"

"I don't know; I never heard anything about her grandmother."

The Admiral turned away. "So you have been out by yourself, little woman?"

"Only a short way, sir; just across the paddock and down the lane."

"To see Mrs. Lowrie, eh?"

The child regarded him in astonishment.

"I know more than you would guess, you see," said the Admiral, nodding at her good-naturedly. "And what business had you at Mrs. Lowrie's?"

"I read to her when I can," said Susan; "her eyes are bad."

"And now you are going to look after the parrot at old Miss Harvey's?"

Susan laughed. "I should like it, sir, but I mustn't."

"Mustn't? Why not?"

"Mamma told me to do my lessons for to-morrow; so I must go in."

"And we are keeping you," exclaimed Lady Augusta. "My dear Admiral, don't you see the child wants to go?"

"Not she; she likes to stay here and talk to me. Now, little one, stand on the step, and I shall hear better."

Susan glanced at Lady Augusta, and hesitated.

"If you wish to converse with her," said Lady Augusta, coldly, "you had better take her with you some way in the carriage. The horses don't like waiting."

"A capital thought! jump up, child."

"But Susan stood still.

"Jump up," repeated the Admiral, sharply.

"Please, sir, mamma said I was to do my lessons."

"Nonsense — nonsense! Who cares for the lessons?"

Susan looked for support to Lady Augusta, but found that she was too deeply absorbed in disentangling the fringe of her parasol to notice what was going on. The colour rushed to the child's cheeks: — "I would rather go in, — I promised."

"Promised, little goose! — What did you do that for?"

"I was obliged, because last time I went to Miss Harvey's without leave," was the honest but timid answer.

"Oh, not quite immaculate!" said the Admiral, in an under tone.

"Please, sir, may I go?" asked Susan, more boldly.

The Admiral laughed. "Aye, with leave; for you would be sure to do so in another minute without it. Next time I ask you to go for a drive, promise me there sha'n't be any promises in the way."

"I can't," said Susan; and an arch smile brightened her face: "mamma's promises come first."

"A good rule for a child's life: don't you think so?" inquired the Admiral, appealing to Lady Augusta.

"Excellent. Drive on, Cave. Good-bye, Susan; tell your mamma we were very sorry not to find her at home." And Lady Augusta sat proudly upright in the carriage, whilst the Admiral tried to watch the little girl, as, with a quick step, delighted at being at last released, she ran into the house.

An hour afterwards Mrs. Graham put her hand fondly on Susan's shoulder, and startled her, as she was repeating Gray's *Elegy* to herself, with her two arms leaning on the table, and her forehead resting upon her hands. "Hard at work, my darling?"

"I am not ready, dear mamma. Lady Augusta called and an old gentleman, and they kept me."

"Oh! Lady Augusta! I saw her carriage drive by the school." But Mrs. Graham did not say that she was sorry to have missed her.

"The old gentleman wanted me to go for a drive, but I couldn't," continued Susan. "He was a very odd old gentleman. He asked if I wasn't like my grandmamma, and Lady Augusta said she didn't know anything about her; was that true?"

"Of course, if Lady Augusta said so." Mrs. Graham answered rather mechanically; and Susan looked at her for an instant, and then went on with her lesson.

Mrs. Graham spoke again. "The old gentleman was a very old friend, Susan; a friend of your grandmamma when she was a child. He liked to think you were like her."

"It must have been a great, great many years ago, said Susan," thoughtfully.

"Yes, a great many. Before any one thought either of you or me."

A very perplexing idea that fact of non-existence was to Susan, and it made her silent for some seconds, whilst her mother opened

a writing-desk, and sat down to enter some memoranda in her school book.

Susan interrupted her after a time: "Mamma, Helen's grand-mamma was my grandmamma too. Does the old gentleman think that we are both like her?"

"Scarcely, I should think; Helen's hair and eyes are so dark."

"Then is he fond of her?"

"I can't say. I have never been able yet to talk to him about her."

"I sha'n't like him if he isn't, mamma," and Susan turned slowly round, and spoke in a tone so solemn, that Mrs. Graham could scarcely refrain from a smile. "I love Helen; and I have promised to love her all my life."

"Promised, dear child? That is a very serious matter."

"I did promise though one day, mamma; and Helen promised too. We thought there was no harm, because we were cousins."

"But cousins may change, Susan: they do very often."

"But Helen and I can't," persisted Susan, "because we have promised."

"Time will show," said Mrs. Graham, going on with her writing as though she wished the conversation to be dropped. But there was a considerable amount of perseverance in Susan's disposition, and she continued: "we made our promise last week, when I went over to Ivors, and we played in the summer-house by the lake. We said it quite properly, and we meant it, mamma; Helen always means what she says."

"I know she does; she inherits truth."

Susan did not quite understand.

"Her father is a very sincere person, and so was her dear mother," added Mrs. Graham in explanation.

"I like to play with Helen better than any one else," pursued Susan, "though she does get into a passion sometimes. She makes up so soon. Grace Berry said one day that she thought Helen was selfish; but she is never selfish with me."

"Perhaps you don't contradict her," said Mrs. Graham smiling.

Susan evidently thought it a disagreeable but true suggestion.

"Helen doesn't like Grace," she said; "so I dare say that is why Grace doesn't like her. Helen likes very few persons, very few indeed; and she thinks some of the people we know very odd."

"She knows little enough about them, my dear," said Mrs. Graham, quickly.

"But she was very sorry for Mrs. Lowrie's bad eyes, when I told her about them," replied Susan, "and she said she should

like to take turns with me to go and read to her; and I told Mrs. Lowrie, and she called her a dear, kind, little thing. I suppose Lady Augusta wouldn't let Helen go."

"It is too far," was Mrs. Graham's evasive answer.

"And Helen liked to hear about Kate Hope's lame foot," continued Susan, "and wanted to give me all the money she had for her. It was only a shilling, because she had bought such a beautiful workbox for Mademoiselle on her birthday, so I did not like to take it. She never laughs at poor people,—only such people as Mrs. Mather, and the Miss Gaunts, when they wear those funny blue bonnets."

"My little Susan must learn not to laugh at blue bonnets or green," said Mrs. Graham, gently. "People often show the worst part of themselves in their dress. The Miss Gaunts have been kinder to Kate Hope than any other persons in Wingfield."

"Have they? and is Kate better?"

"Not much. Miss Mary Gaunt is going to pay for a wheel chair to take her out every day for a fortnight."

"Mrs. Lowrie said this afternoon that she would lend Kate some books," continued Susan.

"And Mrs. Mather has sent her a cushion and a footstool. People in Wingfield are very kind, Susan, though they do wear funny blue bonnets."

"Helen would not laugh at them if she knew them," was Susan's reply, spoken almost to herself, and seeing her mother leave the room, she returned to her lesson.

CHAPTER IV.

No one could be surprised that Lady Augusta Clare did not like Mrs. Graham. It was a necessity of Lady Augusta's nature to patronise and reform, and Mrs. Graham was strangely invulnerable to patronage, and deaf to suggestions. When first established at Wingfield Court, Lady Augusta, in consideration of the attention due to Helen's aunt, had adopted the protecting line; offered the services of one of the under gardeners at Ivors to put the place in order, recommended a housemaid, and talked to her housekeeper about a nursery-maid. She had even taken such an interest in Mrs. Graham's household, as to suggest that a page would do as well as a parlour-maid, and might save the expense

of a boy to clean boots and shoes, besides being taught in time to work in the garden. Nothing indeed was too trifling to engage her attention, and Mrs. Graham was deluged with Parisian patterns of children's dresses, recipes for whooping cough and measles, to say nothing of works on education, catalogues of story books, cards of prayers, and illuminated picture-books, all not only desirable, but, according to Lady Augusta's assertion, absolutely necessary for good education.

But Mrs. Graham quietly stepped aside from the shelter of Lady Augusta's wing, and went on her way with the parlour-maid instead of the page, the cotton dresses made by a lame girl in Wingfield, the books which she had found useful from experience, and, above all, with no theory of education but that taught her by the discipline which she had for years exercised over her own heart. "Educate yourself, and you will learn how to educate others," was the advice given her by a friend soon after her marriage, and she had followed it implicitly. Lady Augusta could understand neither the plan nor its results. Her own heart was a mystery into which she had never searched. The world had been her training school, and according to the maxims of the world she ruled her outward conduct; careful only to choose that form of worldliness which bore the highest reputation. Mrs. Graham constantly appeared to her inconsistent. Professing to be strict, she allowed her children a freedom which Lady Augusta would have thought certain to be Helen's ruin. Unquestionably religious, she seldom talked of religion. A most refined lady, accustomed in her early days to move in the same society as Lady Augusta herself, she could live contentedly in a country neighbourhood and on a small income, and join in mixed country society, without apparently seeing or feeling the want of polish, or even the vulgarity and pretension, which she was unavoidably obliged occasionally to encounter. Where Lady Augusta would have been jarred and irritated, Mrs. Graham was either blind or indifferent. Lady Augusta was provoked; and not only because Mrs. Graham declined to travel along her road, but because, from some unaccountable cause, the objects at which both professed to aim seemed to be reached by her without difficulty; whilst Lady Augusta, notwithstanding her success in some points, was in a perpetual turmoil of effort and disappointment with regard to others.

Susan Graham was to be trusted at all times. Helen was obedient in Lady Augusta's presence, but, if report said truly, most perversely wilful in her absence. Susan's behaviour in church was so simply reverent that no one ever thought of watch-

ing her ; Helen's wandering eyes were a perpetual interruption. Susan, if spoken to, could be agreeable without being in the least forward ; but notice made Helen proudly shy and self-conscious. Susan was kind and considerate ; Helen thoughtlessly tyrannical, and as selfish as the instinct of a naturally noble nature could permit. A good deal of this difference was, no doubt, to be laid to the account of diversity of character. Lady Augusta would not have cared if Susan had showed marked faults which might be compared with Helen's ; but it was exceedingly trying to hear the child constantly held up as a pattern, and to be told that Mrs. Graham's system was so admirable, whilst in Lady Augusta's opinion she had no system at all.

It was the same with their lessons. Helen was excessively clever ; Susan's abilities were only moderate : but every governess who had any knowledge of the children declared that Susan was at least a year before her cousin in acquirements. Helen herself acquiesced in all this with perfect good-humour. Rivalry was foreign to her nature ; and Susan was so timid and unobtrusive that there was in fact little opportunity for any feeling of the kind. But it was intensely galling to Lady Augusta. Her jealousy of Mrs. Graham became at one period so marked as to be apparent even to Sir Henry. For the first time since their marriage he ventured to remonstrate. Mrs. Graham was his sister-in-law, associated with the truest happiness he had ever known. Neglect of her seemed an insult to the memory of his wife. He descanted forcibly upon her claims to every courtesy and attention ; and Lady Augusta, with that curious worldly tact which is such a fruitful source of self-deceit, yielded the point graciously,—acknowledged that she had thought the little Grahams not quite suitable companions for Helen, and therefore had discouraged the intimacy ; but of course, if Sir Henry desired it, she could not but obey his wishes. And Sir Henry went away, congratulating himself upon having given Helen the most judicious and considerate of step-mothers ; whilst Lady Augusta, with equal satisfaction, triumphed in the self-control she had exercised, and resolved still to follow her own way, only more guardedly.

The jealousy slept, but it was not dead. It was called forth again upon the arrival of Admiral Clare. Lady Augusta knew little or nothing of the history of the old man's life : if she had known she would have given him no sympathy. Feelings which dated from sixty years back would have had no life in her eyes. They could be but mummies, strange and repulsive. But he had not been at Ivors a day without showing his interest in Mrs.

Graham ; and Lady Augusta was compelled to listen to commendations lavishly bestowed by Sir Henry and eagerly received by the Admiral, and even at times to join in them herself, though in that tone of faint praise the meaning of which was discovered when she little imagined or desired it. For Lady Augusta would have been unwilling to thwart the Admiral in any fancy, even for a person whom she disliked. It was her object to attach him to Ivors ; yet not, as some might have conjectured, for the sake of the comfortable fortune which he might leave to any person he chose. Lady Augusta cared very little for money : she had never known the want of it ; but she did care a great deal for the carrying out of her pet schemes ; and one which she had greatly at heart might be in a considerable degree aided or retarded by the Admiral's intervention. Her plans for Helen were not limited to the present. She was far-seeing, and looked forward not only to the little girl's introduction into the world, but to that which was the unacknowledged but ultimate object of such introduction, —her marriage. Already in her own mind it was planned ; and, to do Lady Augusta justice, not unwisely, so far as any such plans ever can be wise. Helen's first cousin's cousin, Claude Egerton, was as yet only a boy, just leaving Eton ; but he was clever, handsome, bore a remarkably high character, and was heir to a large property adjoining one of Sir Henry's estates. And Lady Augusta, having determined in her own mind that it was much better for Helen's happiness to choose for her than to give her the opportunity of choosing for herself, and considering the connection extremely eligible, was already scheming to ask Claude Egerton to Ivors, and give him an interest in Helen's home. But he had lost his father, and the Admiral was his guardian, and, as guardians often are, was inclined to be perverse. Lady Augusta talked of the pleasure she should have in inviting Claude to Ivors, and making him acquainted with Maurice Clare ; but the Admiral declared that the boy would do much better to go abroad. She discoursed upon the necessity of keeping up relationships, and the Admiral seemed to be blind to the fact that any connection existed between the families. He would not see any sense in Lady Augusta's opinion that it was good for neighbouring properties to fall into the same hands, and did not at all enter into the wish that Claude would marry young ; but rather expressed a hope that he would look well about him, and not throw himself away : in fact he was inclined, as Lady Augusta could not help perceiving, to contradict her for the mere sake of contradiction. An incipient fit of the gout might in a degree account for this. The

Admiral was but human; and what temper can be expected to stand a twinge of gout? Lady Augusta was wonderfully enduring in the hope of better days; and when she found that the mention of Claude Egerton's name excited opposition, she very wisely dropped it. But not the less earnestly did she work for her purpose by humouring the Admiral's will; and with such success that, before three weeks had passed after the call made at Wingfield, her point was gained. Claude Egerton was invited to Ivors for a fortnight; and the price paid for the boon was an invitation given to little Susan Graham for a day.

Far-scheming worldly people must have great patience and great faith in themselves. Very much wiser are they in their generation than "the children of light." Few are to be found to toil for a distant Heaven as Lady Augusta Clare toiled for earth. Eight years at least were to pass before she could hope to see even the beginning of the end at which she aimed,—eight years, in which Helen and Claude might both be taken ill and die, or the boy's character might change, or his interest might fail to be excited, or, if excited, might fail to survive the various and absorbing pursuits of manhood. Yet her determination never wavered. The very existence of an obstacle was but an additional motive for pursuing her object. There was a large amount of enterprise, and what in a man would have been the spirit of speculation, in Lady Augusta's disposition; and all the chances of failure were only so many more incentives to perseverance. And so Claude Egerton came to Ivors, and was petted, and told that he was to look upon Lady Augusta as a mother, and Sir Henry as a father; and Maurice was to be his brother, and Helen his sister; whilst his will was humoured and his opinions were deferred to, and every thing was done to spoil him, and render him unworthy of the destiny which Lady Augusta had thought fit to assign him.

"A fortunate fellow," said the world, as it looked on: and Claude Egerton was fortunate, but not for the reasons which the world would have assigned. He was fortunate because, in the ordering of Providence, the temptations of wealth, and talent, and high position in the world had been balanced by early and great sorrow.

He was an orphan at fifteen. His father was drowned whilst boating on the river which flowed through his own grounds; his mother died three months afterwards of a broken heart. The first grief alone would have crushed the boy to the dust for a season; the second sobered him for life. His parents had been no ordinary

people. Religious, simple, and consistent, they had given him an example which, young as he was, he had thoroughly appreciated. the world without them was one great blank ; and though companions envied him his freedom, and dependants flattered him for his wealth, and even his superiors paid all outward respect to his talents, Claude's heart still ached with that hollow, dreary aching which nothing but affection can satisfy.

Ivors was very soothing to him in such a state of feeling. He was too young and too simple-minded to see through Lady Augusta's pretence. He believed her cordiality to be sincere ; and when once she began to understand him, — and that was when he had been one day only in the house, — she took pains to win his heart by sympathy with his tastes and even his foibles. Fastidiousness and exclusiveness were Claude's characteristics, as they were hers ; though with him they were beginning to be acknowledged as faults, with her they were cherished as virtues. He did not, indeed, feel that he could be fond of her, and sometimes wondered why a few hearty words from Sir Henry should seem so much more valuable than the unceasing attentions of Lady Augusta ; but she was very kind, and he was grateful, and the awkward reserve which had marked him on his first arrival wore off before his departure, and when Lady Augusta hoped they should soon see him again, and Sir Henry bade him remember that he was engaged to eat his Christmas dinner with them, Claude responded to the invitation with a readiness which satisfied Lady Augusta that the first scene of the first act of her drama had been successfully performed. "We will all write to you, Claude," were Lady Augusta's parting words : "and Helen shall tell you how the kitten and the puppy agree." Claude did not particularly wish to hear from Helen, who was to him only a pretty little forward child of ten years of age, very apt to be rude and conceited when out of her mamma's sight ; but he liked anything which kept up the connection with Ivors, — was duly grateful, and promised to write in return ; and Lady Augusta kept Helen by her side in the hall, that she might see the last of "dear Claude," though the child was in an agony to run away to her doll, and made her escape just as Maurice, who was to ride with his friend into Wingfield, came rushing down the stairs, nearly throwing his little sister down in his eagerness ; and mounting his pony, called out to Claude that they should be desperately late, and rode off with him.

"A charming boy, Claude !" said Lady Augusta, as she went back to the library, to give an account of the departure to the Admiral.

"Your Ladyship is pleased to flatter him," was the reply; and Lady Augusta drew back, feeling that she had touched upon a peculiarity.

CHAPTER V.

EIGHT years! a long time to pass, a short time perhaps to describe. Yet many events happened in the eight years which dated from Claude Egerton's first visit to Ivors,—events interesting and important, and certainly not without their result upon the characters and fortunes of the individuals who were at that time associated in intimacy, but which would sound wearisome if chronicled. It would be vain, for instance, to tell how Helen was tutored, lectured, and made to speak French like a Parisian, and chatter German to a German maid, and discourse upon Italy in the pure "*lingua Toscana in bocca Romana*," which seemed in its sweetness as though it must have been her native tongue. Useless would it be to give a catalogue of the books which she read with Lady Augusta, or the courses of mathematics and logic which she followed with the tutor who instructed Maurice in the holidays; and though it was very pleasant to hear her light fingers rush over the piano or touch the harp, and enrapturing to listen to the thrilling notes of her rich, liquid voice, it would be but an uninteresting task to enumerate the professors who instructed her in the early visits to London, or the musical ladies who occasionally spent a few months at Ivors for the purpose of giving Miss Clare a lesson.

So also with Claude Egerton's intimacy at Ivors. If Lady Augusta was satisfied with the result, there can be no need to inquire into the means by which it was attained. Claude's visits were very like each other. The progress of his acquaintance was quite natural. It was only by degrees that it came to be considered a matter of course that he should always spend Christmas at Ivors. There was no restraint put upon his inclinations, and latterly he had been there very little, having spent more than a year and a half on a continental tour. Even the lynx-eyed old Admiral, who had, after two years' uncertainty, bought a small estate between Ivors and Wingfield, could see no reason to find fault. Every thing was managed by Lady Augusta with apparent simplicity, and Helen herself was so entirely free from any consciousness of the web which was weaving for her future

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destinies, that it would have seemed wrong to suggest a suspicion of plan or meaning in all that went on.

Whether the Admiral might have been more clear-sighted if differently circumstanced, may perhaps be doubted. But his interests were now wholly given to Mrs. Graham; and Lady Augusta, finding that the preoccupation of his thoughts prevented him from interfering with her own schemes, was less inclined to quarrel with conduct which might at times have been construed into neglect. He had grown very infirm in the course of eight years, and seldom now moved from his own fireside at Heath Lodge, though Lady Augusta gave him stated invitations at stated times, and visited him regularly once a month, and made Helen ride over much oftener. She cared nothing for him; indeed, if obliged to confess the truth, she would probably have owned that she disliked him; and undoubtedly she was quite conscious that he disliked her; but dislike had no influence upon Lady Augusta's actions. Hers was the worldly charity which can "bear all things" for its own object; and whilst the fact of the Admiral's residence at Heath Lodge brought Claude Egerton more frequently into the neighbourhood of Ivors, she was quite willing to make the little sacrifices of cordiality which were required to keep upon good terms with the gouty, irritable, but kind-hearted old man.

Eight years had worked great changes also in Mrs. Graham's family. Susan Graham was now nineteen, and Isabella was seventeen, and Anna was growing so tall as quite to look down upon her eldest sister, and Charlie had long since cut all his teeth, and ceased to take much interest in old Miss Harvey's parrot, and instead, was a schoolboy, proud of standing high in the opinion of the head master of the Wingfield Grammar School, though as much devoted to cricket as to Latin verses.

Mrs. Graham had many anxieties, but they had not yet made her look old. Wrinkles had marked but lightly her sweet bright clever face; upon the whole, perhaps, it was more sunshiny than when she first came to Wingfield. Sorrow for her husband's loss was then too recent to be shaken off. Now, the first poignant grief was softened; though he was always present to her in thought; she could feel that she was travelling towards rather than away from him, and care for the children had drawn her out of herself, and restored the naturally cheerful tone of her mind. The Admiral often said that she was much the youngest of the party, and certainly she was more like Susan's elder sister than her mother. Activity and energy, both of body and mind, she possessed in an uncommon degree, and so far she was like Lady Augusta;

but there was no love of power in Mrs. Graham. It was a gentle, fresh, inspiring influence which she exercised. Lady Augusta cared only to show what she could do herself; Mrs. Graham thought only of what she could induce others to do. Her daughters were very unlike her; they resembled their father more than their mother; and Colonel Graham had been a reserved man, with a tendency to morbidness, which was painfully inherited by Isabella; whilst Anna had exhibited from infancy a proud and wayward temper, requiring the utmost tact to subdue. Mrs. Graham had serious difficulties to encounter, and much experience to gain in the labour of education; and she made many blunders, and received a great deal of good and bad advice from her friends in consequence; but in spite of it all, in some unaccountable way,—unaccountable at least to Lady Augusta—the blunders worked well in the end. No house was more cheerful than Wingfield Court,—no home was more domestic,—no children could be more affectionate or dutiful than Mrs. Graham's. The problem was not easily solved by the world, still less by Mrs. Graham herself. She was so conscious of her own deficiencies, it seemed wonderful that her children should turn out so well. She felt it to be a special mercy, the answer—as she humbly trusted—to many imperfect but very earnest prayers; and so she put aside every thought of herself, and worked on as before, gladly and hopefully, with the watchful inward eye keeping guard over the pure spring of the inward life, and the fountain of love and thankfulness welling forth from it unceasingly, to be the source of vigour and earnestness to all around her.

Self-education! there lay the secret. Doubtless God does hear and answer prayer, a mother's prayer especially; but He has for the most part willed to work by means, and we have no right to expect miracles to be interposed in our favour.

If we *do* what we teach, our children will do the same; and they will do what we do, in spite of our teaching; and no system, be it ever so wise, will work for good without good practice; and no system, be it ever so erroneous, will work *entirely* for evil with it.

It is no new maxim. The proverb that example is better than precept, is older than any one now living. Perhaps we might put it more strongly, and say that precept is nothing without practice, strictly and literally. So when we sigh over the low, worldly, selfish tone of mind which, in spite of careful training, we perhaps discover in our children, we may learn to search into our own hearts for the cause.

The morning occupations were finished. Anna was putting away her books, Isabella closing the piano, Susan seated at a little writing-table, just beginning a note.

"Look at Susan," said Anna, laughing; "beginning to write now: why it wants only a quarter of an hour to dinner!"

"Just enough time," replied Susan: "we shall be going out directly after dinner."

"Not directly after dinner, I hope," said Isabella, rather languidly. "I hate going out so soon."

"We must set off rather soon if we mean to go to the Lodge," continued Anna; "the days are beginning to close in."

"And the Admiral keeps us so long, always," said Isabella: "his stories with mamma are never ending."

"Poor dear old Admiral!" exclaimed Susan, looking up. "You must remember to take him Charlie's last letter. I promised it to him the last time I saw him."

"Don't you mean to go yourself, Susan?" inquired Isabella, in a tone of disappointment.

"I shall, if I don't ride; but Helen said she would come over if she could."

"We shall never have you, now Helen is come back," observed Isabella, sighing: "that is the only reason why I dislike her being here."

"Perhaps the pony I ride will be out," said Susan, good-humouredly; "and then I can't go. You know Helen only comes over on speculation."

"She ought to be here by half-past two, if she comes at all, and she won't manage that," said Anna.

"Why not?" asked Susan.

"Only because Anna has settled that she won't," exclaimed Isabella. "Anna's love of punctuality and Helen's dislike to it never suit, you know."

"Helen is improved, lately," observed Susan.

"So like you, dear Susan!" exclaimed Isabella: "yon never will hear a word against Helen."

"I only like truth," replied Susan; "and Helen is certainly improved."

"I can't say that I see it," said Anna.

"Or that we have had much opportunity of seeing it," observed Isabella, laughing; "she has not been here since April."

Susan laughed too. "Well? we will give up the punctuality, if you insist. She was very troublesome last year, I remember."

"She ought to have learnt better by this time," said Anna. "How Lady Augusta scolds when she is late!"

"Just the way to make her worse," observed Isabella. "Helen always goes precisely the reverse way to what Lady Augusta wishes."

"Dear Isabella! please.—I can't bear to hear you say such things," exclaimed Susan. "People will think, by and by, that you mean them."

"Isabella does mean them," said Anna, "and you would mean them too, Susan, if you would acknowledge what is at the bottom of your heart. But you know we are both very fond of Helen," she added, playfully, "only not quite so blind as you are."

"I always understand Susan's blindness," said Isabella; "I should be blind too if any one was as fond of me as Helen is of Susan."

"A great many people are just as fond of you, Bella dear, if you would but believe it."

Isabella sighed. "I don't envy you, Susan; I know you quite deserve it; but I should like to be as taking as you are."

"I don't think Susan is taking," exclaimed Anna, bluntly.

Susan laughed heartily. "Thank you, Anna; I never was conceited enough yet to believe that I was. If I were beautiful, and graceful, and clever——"

"Like Helen," said Anna, archly.

"Well like Helen,—I may just as well say it; though you will be sure to quiz me. She really is taking; and if any one ever has a fancy for me, I know it is merely by way of contrast."

"I don't profess to comprehend that very deep sentence," said Anna with mock gravity, as she looked at the clock. "Five minutes, Susan, if you wish to finish your letter."

"I can't finish it now," said Susan, thoughtfully. "Isabella, I am sure you must know what I mean. When persons are tired of taking people——"

"Then they take to untaking ones," exclaimed Anna, laughing.

"Yes, for a kind of rest."

"I should not care why I was taken to," said Isabella, earnestly, "if I could only make friends like Susan."

"I don't think the number of one's friends signifies," said Susan.

"I didn't mean friends, but a friend."

"One dear friend with whom you might retire from the world and keep poultry," said Anna. "That was always my notion of a friend when I was five years old; I don't think I should dislike it now; I am very fond of Dorkings."

"I can't talk to you, Anna; I can to Susan," said Isabella.

"You had better talk to mamma," exclaimed Anna, as her

mother entered the room. "Dear mamma, Isabella has set her heart upon retiring from the cares of life, and keeping Dorkings: you won't object?"

"Not if she likes it, certainly. But Susan, my love, you and I must not give up life's cares just yet;—there is an invitation from Lady Augusta to a dinner party."

"Oh, mamma! and is there any message from Helen about the riding?"

"Much more important than the invitation," whispered Anna, as her sister took the note.

Susan's countenance when she laid it down again was expressive. It betokened annoyance, which even a very calm, self-controlled character could not instantly check.

"Faithless?" asked Anna, in a provoking tone. But when Susan did not smile she went up to her and kissed her, and whispered, "I can't bear her, if she vexes you."

"It is not Helen; it is Lady Augusta," said Susan. "Mamma, why does she write in this way?"

"Because it suits her my love, I suppose," said Mrs. Graham, in a tone of indifference.

Susan took up the note again, and Anna peeped over her shoulder and read it aloud:—

"Dear Mrs. Graham, —The Admiral and Mr. Egerton dine with us to-morrow, and I am sure it will give them pleasure to meet you and your eldest daughter. May we hope to see you at half-past six? I regret that we cannot offer beds, as our house is full. Sir Henry unites with me in kind compliments.

"Believe me very truly yours,

"AUGUSTA CLARE."

"Helen begs me to add that she is sorry it will not be in her power to ride with your daughter this afternoon."

Anna caught the note from her sister's hand and tossed it on the table. "Kind compliments indeed! Mamma what does she mean?"

"That she wants us to dine with her, my dear," said Mrs. Graham, quietly.

"Our aunt, Lady Augusta! as some people will persist in calling her," said Isabella, looking very much amused.

"Aunt! I would rather have a kitchen-maid for my aunt!" exclaimed Anna. "Dear mamma!" and she drew near her mother and put her arm round her, "I don't mean to be naughty, but you must let me speak out."

"You will do it whether I let you or not, I am afraid, child," said Mrs. Graham, lightly. "But Anna dear, seriously, I don't like that off-hand way of talking. After all there is nothing so very dreadful in the note."

"Only that she might have written it if we were perfect strangers," said Isabella.

"Scarcely: she would not give strangers quite such a short invitation."

"Mamma can be as bitter as we are when she likes it," said Anna, archly.

"It is too much of a trifle to be bitter about," observed Mrs. Graham.

"It is just like Lady Augusta," said Isabella.

"And not at all like Helen," remarked Susan, taking up the note again. "Mamma must we go?"

"Of course, my love: we have no excuse for declining."

"But it is so rude," exclaimed Anna. "One can't accept rudeness."

"I never do accept it, Anna: I never suppose it can be intended."

"Dear mamma! we shall never be as good as you are," said Susan.

"I am afraid there is more worldly wisdom than goodness in the principle, Susan. But I have found it save me a great deal of annoyance in life. If people are inclined to be disagreeable, nothing baffles them so much as not to have it acknowledged. As for Lady Augusta, it really is not worth while to take any notice; she is so changeable; if she is rude to-day she will be civil to-morrow."

"That is what tries me in her," said Susan. "If she would be always rude I shouldn't care. But just before they went to London she was as amiable as possible: she all but kissed me when she said good-bye."

"What an escape!" exclaimed Anna. "But really, mamma, why should you go to-morrow?"

"Because, as I said before, I don't exactly see how we can say no; and the Admiral would be disappointed."

"It is a trying thing to him to dine at Ivors," said Isabella. "Mr. Egerton used to say that he never could induce him to accept an invitation if he had two days given him to think about it."

"Mr. Egerton will be with him now to support him," said Susan. "I didn't know he was returned from abroad."

"He came back the day before yesterday," said Mrs. Graham. "It will be one pleasure to-morrow to meet him."

"Yes," observed Susan, heartily. "I dare say we shall see him at the Lodge this afternoon."

"He will be out shooting," observed Mrs. Graham. "Besides, Susan, one can't all at once rush into travels, which is what you would like."

"I can with him," said Susan. "He is the most getting-on-able-with person, as Helen would call him, that I ever knew,—at least he was. I suppose his travels have not altered him."

"Of course he gets on with Helen," said Isabella. "She has known him all her life. He frightens me."

Susan was for a moment thoughtful. "I suppose he would be called frightening; but, mamma, is any one really frightening who lets you feel in conversation that you are treading on firm ground; that he has no quicksands in his mind?"

Mrs. Graham smiled. "I can't answer metaphysical questions all in a hurry, dear child. Besides, I must write my answer now; and then — to dinner."

CHAPTER VI.

"CLAUDE, my boy, what do you intend to do with yourself now?" asked the Admiral, as Claude Egerton stood by the fire, waiting, in compliance with one of the old man's fancies, to pour out the glass of port wine with which he always concluded the luncheon, which it was his whim to eat alone in his own study.

The answer came very slowly. Claude Egerton was always rather slow in speech, and the question was a serious one.

"I have thought of Parliament, sir, if the present member for Ramsay should resign, as they say he will. I am not sure, however, that I am fitted for it."

"Pshaw! That old mock modesty! Throw it away, my boy, as soon as you can; it will do you more harm than good. Why on earth are you not as well fitted for Parliament as half the boobies who enter it?"

"Precisely, my dear sir;" and Claude smiled with a singularly arch smile, which lit up his clever, grave, but stern face so as entirely to change its expression. "It is because I feel they are boobies that I don't want to add one to the number."

"Well enough! if you hadn't, as all the world knows, talent enough to be prime minister. I don't understand shirking responsibility; it's not what I should have expected from you."

"Let me cut the wing of that fowl for you, sir," and Claude tried to take the knife out of the Admiral's unsteady hand. But it was held firmly.

"No, no, I am not going to be balked in that fashion. Speak out plainly like a man."

"It is difficult to be plain to others, sir, when one is not yet plain to oneself."

"High time you should be. Five-and-twenty! and not know your own mind. For shame!"

"I say for shame myself very often; but I have a question as to the direction and ordering of circumstances."

"Mere folly! A wise man makes his own circumstances. Besides, don't tell me that you don't know your own mind. There's not a man in England who has a better judgment or a stronger will of his own than my friend Claude Egerton."

Claude showed no elation at the compliment. He poured out the Admiral's wine, and then sat himself down by his side, and said gravely, "I can talk to you, sir, as I could not talk to every one. Parliament or no Parliament is not the question with me. I only want to see where God has placed my duties."

"Well, yes; we understand each other;" and the Admiral put his large, bony hand affectionately upon Claude's, and then drew it back as though ashamed of the weakness.

"There was a maxim you taught me yourself, sir, when I was a boy," said Claude, "Those serve their country best, who serve their God best."

"Very likely, very likely. What has that to do with Parliament?"

Claude laughed. "A good deal as regards myself. If I spend my money in contested elections, and my time in making bad laws, my people will be left to take care of themselves."

"Elections needn't always be contested, and laws needn't always be bad," replied the Admiral; "and if they are, no thanks to you for keeping out of Parliament, and not trying to make them better. No, no, Claude; depend upon it a man never blunders by taking a large grasp of duties, when Providence puts the outward means of performing them in his power. If you were a beggar I wouldn't say, go into Parliament; and if you were an idiot, I wouldn't say it either; but being, as you are, a young fellow with a fine fortune and fine talents, I say, make the most of them."

"And my people?"

"Your people! why they won't be one whit worse off, for not having you always at their elbows to consult. Hot bed! hot bed! It's the growing evil of the day. Landlords, and schoolmasters, and parents,—we must all have others hanging upon us, living upon us. We have no notion of teaching people to stand on their own legs."

"Not quite the general opinion, that," observed Claude. "The complaint one most often hears is of neglect."

"Past neglect if you will; and present too amongst a certain set. But there's an astonishing mania abroad for doing good, and wonderfully little wisdom in setting about it."

"I dare say you are right, sir. I quite feel the wonderfully little wisdom I have myself."

"Of course you do; what sensible man doesn't? So much the more reason why you shouldn't wish to have a train of people following your blunders."

"Still I must be answerable for the tenants on my own property."

"A mother is answerable for her children. It does not follow that she is the less answerable for her husband, and her friends, and her acquaintances."

"It is very difficult to classify duties," observed Claude.

"Not at all difficult to common sense," exclaimed the Admiral. "If Providence had willed that we should be only fathers, or only masters, or only landlords, or only members of Parliament, the world would have been so arranged that a man who had one task would never have been called upon to attend to another. But things being as they are, and life having many claims, why, we must needs attend to them all as best we can. And remember, Claude, one duty helps another. The man who undertakes the most will in the long run do the best, so long as he does it for God."

Claude pondered.

"You don't own it," continued the Admiral; "you will by and by."

"I should be glad to see it," said Claude.

"Try,—that's all I say; try. Come duties, come will. Loads of things to be done in the world; loads of power to do them with; that is God's appointment. It's a large heart that's wanted, my boy."

"And so I go to Parliament," said Claude, doubtfully.

"And so you go to Parliament," repeated the Admiral.

"And as a preliminary step, dine with Sir Henry Clare, and discuss politics," continued Claude.

"Pshaw! Sir Henry Clare! Your opinion now is worth twenty of his."

"That may not be saying much," replied Claude, smiling. "Not but that he is a very good-hearted, worthy man; only one would not quite like him for a leader."

"Better he than Lady Augusta. Whatever you do, my good fellow, don't follow her."

"I can't forget old times," said Claude.

"The hollowest-hearted woman in Christendom!" exclaimed the Admiral; "and the girl is built upon the same plan."

"Helen! It is actually two years since I have seen her. She is come out now, I suppose."

"Come out—presented—grand as a duchess. Rushed through London,—five balls a night! Down again into the country,—brown holland and sweet simplicity! Faugh!"

Claude laughed, but not as though he paid much attention to what was said. He repeated again to himself, "And so I go to Parliament."

The Admiral understood him. "What man? Doubtful?"

"I must think. You know I always required that."

"Wilful, as usual. Never would be guided."

"Yes, guided; not governed. I must govern myself."

"Be quick about it then."

"I give myself two days. By that time I will decide."

"And lose your chance by delay," was the Admiral's impatient rejoinder. "Who knows that Ramsay is not vacant at this moment?"

Claude only answered by a smile of good-humoured determination, which in boyhood might possibly have betokened obstinacy.

The Admiral required some soothing after this conversation. He loved Claude Egerton as his own child,—he admired and respected him; but he could never quite make up his mind that he was not to govern him. The man-of-war authority to which he had so long been accustomed, was a habit of mind which showed itself to every one; most especially to persons over whom he had once exercised it. And Claude often deceived him unintentionally. That quiet, considerate, deferential manner of his, seemed so very like acquiescence. The Admiral had often talked with him for hours, laying down the law, and arguing under the fullest belief that he was gaining the day, and at the end found that he

had arrived no further than what to him was the very unsatisfactory conclusion, "I will think."

They might perhaps have quarrelled, had not the Admiral generally found that Claude ultimately reached the same point with himself, and acknowledged frankly and courteously, that his opinion had assisted him in gaining it. Such a concession was perhaps a greater triumph in the end than a more hasty victory; but the delay was unquestionably a trial at the time. The Admiral did not care for influence, but he dearly loved obedience, for he had been accustomed to it all his life. And Claude Egerton was a person of singular independence of character, cautious, and conscientious. It was an actual impossibility to him to yield without conviction, or to be convinced without reason and thought from the working of his own mind. This parliamentary question had been brought forward two years before, just previous to his going abroad. The Admiral had urged his wish then with all the vehemence and eloquence he could command, and an amount of praise of Claude's talents, which would have been flattery from any other lips, but which from his was merely the outpouring of a genuine, hearty appreciation that could not be restrained. Claude was not injured by this. At the very outset of life, whilst yet comparatively a boy, he had carefully and dispassionately weighed his own powers, his advantages, and the temptations incident to his natural character. He had high aims, and he was anxious to know how far he might hope to attain them; and the very justice of his self-appreciation kept him from the snare of vanity. Knowing well what he could do, he was not to be deceived as to what he could not do. Eloquent he would never be; popular he was not likely to be. A public leader he might possibly become under peculiar circumstances, but they were such as were not likely to arise. There was no very tempting opening for him in the path of worldly ambition, in spite of all that the Admiral might say. But Claude Egerton's aims were not worldly; and the knowledge that he might probably labour for a life, and leave a name which should never go down to posterity, except as one amongst the insignificant thousands who have worked for their fellow-creatures, and received their reward from God, had no influence upon his energy.

Politics had, however, been put aside when first suggested, because Claude felt his own ignorance upon many points which he knew to be essential to a legislator. Now it appeared to him under a different form. He had travelled, and thought, and read; and although the duties which a seat in Parliament involved were

not alluring to his taste, he no longer felt that they were beyond his powers.

His mind was almost made up when he began his conversation with the Admiral;—perhaps it might have been well if he had given the old man an intimation of the fact before leaving him. He would have spared him a half-hour of irritation, and prepared a more cheerful welcome for Mrs. Graham, Susan, and Isabella when they made their appearance in the library. The Admiral was not cross with his favourites; he was only mournful; and it was in a most dolorous key that he began,—

“So you’re come at last. I thought I never was to see you again. I thought you must all be ill. Susan, you’ve lost all your good looks.”

“That supposes I had some to lose,” replied Susan laughing; “so I must be grateful for the compliment.”

“Young people always have good looks to lose. It’s only we old folks who can afford to be seen at all times. I don’t mean you, Frances,”—and he turned hastily to Mrs. Graham. “You are ten years younger than any of your daughters.”

“Tell-tale grey hairs I am afraid are against you, my dear sir,” said Mrs. Graham. “Even my children are beginning to own that I am silvery. But we are all going to be young and gay to-morrow, I hear, and dine at Ivors.”

“You are going, are you?” His face brightened directly.

“We had an invitation from Lady Augusta just now, and we thought of accepting it.”

“Clever old woman! she knows how to tempt me. I vow, Frances, if I hadn’t the hope of meeting some one better worth speaking to than she I never would set foot in Ivors again.”

“There is always Sir Henry,” observed Mrs. Graham.

“Well enough, if one gets him in the humour; but he is not half the man he was: she cows him. And now the girl is out, as they call it——”

Susan interrupted him. “Helen? Oh please not! Helen is charming.”

The Admiral turned round sharply; but he could not speak sharply. The little face once seen beneath the shade of the close cottage bonnet might have altered in many ways; but its expression was the same now as it had been eight years before.

“My child, don’t trust her,” he said earnestly. “Don’t trust anything that has been educated by Lady Augusta Clare.”

“That would be the only reason for distrusting her,” said Mrs.

Graham. "There is nothing insincere in Helen herself; she comes of a different stock."

"Grafted on a crab," said the Admiral.

"And so likely to turn out all the better according to the analogy," replied Mrs. Graham.

The Admiral looked annoyed. "It's the thing you are always tiresome about, Frances,—you and Claude Egerton. By the bye, where is the boy? It's a shame he doesn't come in to see you."

"He was walking by the avenue to the stables as we came up," said Isabella. "I think he saw us."

"I think he didn't, Miss Isabella; he knows his duty to old friends too well. Susan, my dear, may I ask you to ring that bell?—ring it hard, twice."

Susan rang as desired. The servant entered.

"Barnes, where's Mr. Egerton?"

"He went down by the farm, sir;—he was looking at the new road."

"Tell him to come in,—I want him." Then seeing a smile pass over Mrs. Graham's face, the Admiral added, "Tell him Mrs. Graham is here, and the young ladies." As the last words were spoken his eye rested on Susan.

Notwithstanding his first querulous assertion, Susan had certainly not lost her good looks, or, if she had parted with some, there were enough remaining to make a very pleasant face.

It was the expression more than the features or the complexion, however, which was agreeable; for Susan Graham had by no means a claim to be called beautiful, or even pretty. She had bright intelligent eyes; but the outline of her face was rather square, and her mouth, though well formed, was too large for symmetry. She was deficient in animation also, except, which was rarely the case, when excited by some subject of peculiar interest. Generally the world, as the saying is, went quietly with her. Common acquaintances called her amiable; more intimate friends said she was superior; only her mother knew her as she really was. Yet she could scarcely have passed unnoticed as she sat that day by the Admiral's easy chair, resting her hand upon the arm, and looking upon the ground thoughtfully. Goodness was in her face, repose in her figure and attitude, with that utter absence of pretence and self-consciousness which is the characteristic of a really refined mind.

The Admiral must have seen much in her to engage his interest; for he gazed at her intently for some moments, and then patted her hand; and when, a little startled, she looked at him with a

smile of innocent good humour, he averted his face, and dashed his fingers across his eyes, as he exclaimed, "That fellow Claude! why, on earth, doesn't he come?"

"Coming, sir," said a laughing voice; and Claude Egerton entered through the window.

He went up to Mrs. Graham directly, full of gratitude for having been summoned. He had not seen them from the avenue, and would have been really sorry to miss them.

"Didn't I say so, Miss Isabella?" inquired the Admiral in triumph.

Claude spoke hastily: "Was there any doubt upon the subject, sir? I hoped I had credit for better taste."

"We are morning visitors," observed Mrs. Graham; "we know what we have to expect."

"But I don't like to look upon you as morning visitors. You were not that when I went away."

"You have been gone two years," said Mrs. Graham; "and you have been travelling. Who could answer for the change that might make? You might have returned with a fez and a long beard for aught we knew."

"And you think two years so long that one must be changed, do you?" inquired Claude, rather reproachfully.

"It's not much short of an inch in a man's nose to such a young fellow as you," exclaimed the Admiral. "Why in two years, at your age, Claude, a man in my days might have had changes of friends for every month in the year, fought duels by the dozen, broken his heart twenty times, and had it mended again as often. Two years was a lifetime then, by the deeds a fellow put into them. But you young ones are so slow; when you reach what you want, you can't summon energy to stretch out your hand to take it. What do you say, Susan, my dear?"

Susan started and blushed. She had not quite been listening, and she said so.

"A penny for your thoughts, then. They must have been worth that at least."

Claude regarded her with amusement, and, perhaps, a little pity. He thought she would be shy.

But Susan was quiet only, not shy. She never thought about herself, or about any one else, in a way to make her shy; and she said at once, "I was thinking of Helen."

"You might have been thinking of something better, then," muttered the Admiral.

But Claude caught up the words, and repeated, "Helen? Miss Clare do you mean?"

"Yes, she is my only Helen. The only one I know."

"I have not seen her yet," said Claude, carelessly; "I suppose she is a good deal altered. She was rather pretty when I went away."

"Pretty! she is lovely," and Susan's eyes sparkled with eagerness; "every one says she is."

"I never care for professed beauty," said Claude.

"Helen is no professed beauty," observed Susan, coldly, and rather proudly. "She professes nothing."

"Take care, Claude," exclaimed the Admiral: "you are on unsafe ground."

Claude made a mock bow of apology. "I beg pardon, I ought to have known that young ladies' friendships are sacred."

Susan was silent, but the crimson colour flushed to her temples.

Claude addressed himself to Mrs. Graham. He inquired after old friends, spoke of his own travels, discussed a new book, all with considerable eagerness; but from time to time he glanced at Susan, who still remained silent, even when Isabella ventured to join in the conversation.

It might have appeared like temper in any one else; but no one could suspect Susan Graham of ill humour.

Claude gave up trying to understand what seemed to him a mood; but his kind-heartedness made him reproach himself for having unintentionally caused it.

The conversation lasted long; and then the Admiral said he would go out, and by the help of a stick, and Claude Egerton's arm, he went quite round the shrubbery, and in sight of a new plantation; and talking to Mrs. Graham, and laying down the law every now and then to Claude, he managed to forget his querulousness, and even to hear Lady Augusta's name mentioned with placidity.

"Since one must go, it's best to go when one may find persons fit to talk to," he said, as Mrs. Graham stood, wishing him good bye, and reminding him that they might hope to meet at Ivors the following day. "Not but what I believe she asks you, Frances, because you are the only creature within twenty miles who would bear being bored with a gouty old man."

"We won't inquire into the cause, so long as it gives us pleasure," said Mrs. Graham.

The Admiral smiled, but doubtfully. "You are no better than the rest of the world, Frances. Where is the pleasure of seeing

me? Better look at me there;" and he pointed to a large portrait of himself, taken when he was about eight-and-twenty. "I was worth something then."

"To those who knew you then, dear sir: we would rather have you now."

"Yes," said Susan heartily.

The word escaped so simply, yet so abruptly, that every one laughed, except Susan herself.

"You will know where to look for a compliment, sir," observed Claude, addressing the Admiral.

"It is true," said Susan, quickly.

"Of course it is, if she says it," exclaimed the Admiral, drawing Susan towards him, and patting her on the shoulder. "She is true to the back-bone." Then making her look towards him, he kissed her heartily on both cheeks, adding, "God bless you, child, and thank you; you will never be the worse for an old man's gratitude."

Susan smiled. Some people might have thought she did not care, for she was the first to walk out of the room. No one noticed her as she stood at the hall door, trying to keep down some rising feeling which would struggle to have vent.

Claude Egerton walked with them through the shrubbery. He talked almost entirely to Mrs. Graham; but before they parted, he said to Susan, "I annoyed you just now, Miss Graham; you thought me sarcastic. I did not intend to be so; I am very sorry."

It was a thoroughly humble tone, so humble that it struck Susan with a sense of the ludicrous. She laughed heartily. "Really I had almost forgotten; only I don't like being accused of a young lady's friendship. But pray don't distress yourself, Mr. Egerton; it does not in the least signify. And Helen and I, you know, are young ladies. It does not in the least signify," she repeated; and Claude shook hands, and they parted.

Perhaps he would have been better pleased if it had signified. Even the best of us do not like to have our words put aside as of no consequence.

CHAPTER VII.

LADY AUGUSTA was in the drawing-room. It wanted about a quarter of an hour to dinner. The few guests staying in the house were gone to dress. Lady Augusta herself had been ready some time. The Admiral was always early, and would have con-

sidered it an affront if she had not been there to receive him. Lady Augusta was a different person in the different rooms of her house; a great many of us are. She was busy and important, devoted to education, morals, and politics in her library, stately and artistic in her drawing-room. She had a quick eye for order and beauty of every kind, knew exactly where each chair and table should be placed, and could tell the precise position in which her lovely little Italian statuettes ought to stand, so as to group well with the flower vases and Dresden china. Though the room looked perfect to other eyes, it was never so to her own; and even now she walked round, changing various ornaments, and bringing out ottomans and easy chairs, so as to arrange her guests easily and without formality, and save them from the restraint of a circle.

All this was not love of display. Lady Augusta was above the vulgar pretension of a large house and handsome furniture, as she was above that of rank. She was born to the possession of both; and being natural to her, they were enjoyed for themselves, not in the way of comparison with others. Yet they were enjoyed, and so as to render her morbidly fastidious as to anything which offended her taste or her exclusiveness. Gaudy colouring, absence of symmetry and arrangement in furniture, jarred upon her in the same way as a vulgar accent or a showy dress. She had no desire to be told that her house was magnificent, and cared little whether the ornaments she placed in it cost five pounds or fifty; but she did unquestionably pique herself upon her good taste, and delighted in the admiration of the few whose opinion she valued, as much as persons whose pretension she would have despised delighted in that of the many.

Lady Augusta put the finishing touch to her work, by placing a very exquisite carving of the Holy Family, so as to appear grouped by accident with a marble cross and some rare flowers, and after casting around a glance of satisfaction, took up a book. Drawing-room books were of course different from library books; but they were all of the same cast: not novels—Lady Augusta professed to have no taste for novels—but volumes of the standard poets—works on painting, “Southey’s Colloquies,” and “Bacon’s Essays,” lives of celebrated people—George Herbert, and Nicholas Ferrar; all handsome books, well got up, and lying about as if they were the natural growth of the house. Lady Augusta devoted herself to Nicholas Ferrar now,—why, perhaps, could scarcely be told, unless it might have been to contrast the troublesome self-denial of Little Gidding with the comfortable goodness of Ivors.

The ante-room door opened, and Lady Augusta laid down her book, rose, and advanced a few steps.

A rush into the room, and a sudden retreat! and Lady Augusta exclaimed, "Helen, is that you?"

A pause; the question was repeated.

"Yes, only myself; no one else, mamma;" and Helen retreated still further into the back ground.

"What is the matter, child? What are you looking for? come here!" Helen could keep in retirement no longer, and she came forward in her riding habit, her cap off, flushed and hurried, yet, as Susan Graham had said, lovely. Not only in features, but in expression, in grace, in animation and refinement, lay Helen Clare's claim to beauty. Other faces might by possibility be more strictly and classically perfect; but where else were to be found the brilliant complexion, the full, lustrous eye, with its wonderful quickness, and softness, and depth, the mouth half proud, half good humoured, or the varied changes which followed each other like April rain and sunshine, never allowing one to feel secure of the present charm, yet making it doubtful whether each successive expression were not more captivating than the last?

If Lady Augusta flattered herself that education had any thing to do with Helen's personal appearance, she had indeed reason to be satisfied.

But she was very dissatisfied now, and with reason. She said nothing, but pointed to the timepiece.

"Yes, mamma, I see. Ten minutes will be quite sufficient." Helen lost something of her charm when she spoke, though her voice was musical in its sweetness. If there were not temper in the back-ground, there was at least an indifference, an unwillingness to own herself wrong, which was very like it.

"My dear, ten minutes will not be sufficient. I informed you that I wished you to be in the drawing-room when the Admiral arrived."

"Dear old Admiral! he won't care; Annette won't be a minute dressing me; and I really could not help it: I went so much farther than I intended."

"There is a ring at the bell," observed Lady Augusta.

"He will be an hour taking off his coat," said Helen, still lingering.

Lady Augusta sat down, severe and dignified. Helen was going away. "You can't go, Helen, now; you will meet the Admiral in the hall, and Mr. Egerton."

"O! Claude; then it does not at all signify. He will quite

understand. We always used to be late when we went out riding together."

"So negligent! so untidy!" said Lady Augusta, her eye taking in at one glance all the defects of Helen's dress.

Helen blushed, arranged her collar, and smoothed her hair with her hand. "I am very untidy, I am afraid; I don't like that; perhaps he won't see me." And she drew back behind the folding door, and, just as Claude Egerton entered from the ante-room into the drawing-room, glided past and found herself face to face with the Admiral.

If it had been Susan, he would have laughed; being Helen, he only said in a very grumpy tone, "Late for dinner, I suppose, young lady."

Helen did not see Claude Egerton turn from Lady Augusta to look at her; but she felt that he did, and the consciousness of the crumpled collar and the disordered hair was very confusing, notwithstanding her professions that with him it did not signify. Yet she recovered herself, and with very graceful self-possession, apologised heartily, owned that she had been careless about the time, begged the Admiral to excuse her, and hoped not to detain the dinner, and then with simple ease of manner shook hands with Claude, and told him she was very glad to see him at Ivors again, and left the room.

"Hollow-hearted as Lady Augusta," came to Claude's recollection. He would not even own to himself that she was beautiful.

The room soon became full. Sir John Hume, one of the members for the county, and his wife, and two daughters, were all staying in the house, together with Captain Mordaunt, one of Lady Augusta's many cousins, and old Lord Warnford, whom the Admiral had been especially invited to meet, but who appeared to have nothing particular to say to him. The Admiral's good-humour was not increased by the non-arrival of Mrs. Graham. Lady Augusta devoted herself to telling him the history of a great political meeting which Sir Henry had that day attended in Wingfield, and which had detained him so long that he had only returned about half an hour before dinner; but her eloquence was lost upon the old man, who looked round every time the door opened, much to Lady Augusta's annoyance, and was continually murmuring to himself, "She's not used to be late."

"Helen are you speaking of, my dear Admiral?" said Lady Augusta, catching his words. "I am afraid she is rather unpunctual. Claude will remember"—she addressed Mr. Egerton so directly that he could not but give her his full attention:—

"We were speaking of Helen's unpunctuality. You must remember it, I am afraid, from unhappy experience. Poor child! she was talking to me just now of the pleasant rides you used to have together."

Claude was politely interested in the subject; but he did not retain any particular remembrance of his rides with Helen, and could only say that he believed she was a very bold rider.

"Oh! sadly, desperately bold! It quite shakes my nerves when I know she is going out. But there are so few one can trust her with: and a servant is really no protection. Maurice is to be here the day after to-morrow; and then no doubt they will ride constantly."

"Come at last!" The Admiral half rose from his seat. "I beg your ladyship's pardon; but I thought Frances Graham meant to play me a trick."

"She is late," said Lady Augusta, glancing at the clock; and with a stateliness which did more than justice to her height, she walked down the room, to meet Mrs. Graham and Susan.

Mrs. Graham saw no occasion for an apology. She was, strictly speaking, in time; and she never unnecessarily gave Lady Augusta the opportunity of forgiving her. Neither was she in the least chilled or awed by the ceremonious politeness which insisted upon placing her on the sofa, at the farthest possible distance from every one else, and left Susan in the chair next to Lord Warnford, to make herself as agreeable as a young girl of nineteen possibly could to a deaf octogenarian. A few answers were made to the icy observations of her hostess; and then, by some means most provoking to Lady Augusta, Mrs. Graham contrived to enter into conversation with Sir Henry, and interest Sir John Hume, and even excite a laugh from the very dull Lady Hume; and the room, which had before been filled with solemn murmurs and shadowy smiles, caught the circling wave of ease and cheerfulness, till Susan took courage to make her voice heard, and, giving up Lord Warnford as hopeless, inquired of Claude Egerton, who was standing near her, whether he had yet seen Helen.

"For a moment; she came in late from riding. I had scarcely time to speak to her."

His tone of indifference was provoking to Susan; who had rather looked forward to the admiration which she felt certain Helen would excite. She thought Claude perverse, and was disinclined to pursue the conversation. She was forced to do so, however; for, in his innocence of the offence he had given, he went on talking, not about Helen, but about the Admiral's god-

son, her brother Charles, and this being a most engrossing subject, it was impossible to avoid throwing herself into it.

Impatience at the delay of dinner was by this time manifesting itself. The Admiral tapped the table with his fingers, Sir Henry looked at Lady Augusta, and asked if it were worth while to wait for Helen.

"Certainly not," was the decided answer; and the bell was rung. Sir Henry was evidently annoyed; and Lady Augusta looked more than congealed in her frigid severity.

"Here she is!" exclaimed Susan, bursting into the middle of a sentence begun by Mr. Egerton, and then begging him to excuse her.

Claude turned slowly round, as, timidly, and with a blush crimsoning her cheek, Helen entered from the ante-room, dressed according to what the Admiral would have called sweet simplicity, in white muslin, and with no ornament except a pearl spray in her hair.

Claude glanced at her, continued his remark to Susan, blundered, apologised, and looked again,—and at last fairly broke off the conversation to watch Helen, who had by this time made her way to Mrs. Graham, and was talking to her.

"I must go to her," said Susan; and she rose and crossed the room.

And Claude stood silent till dinner was announced, and then, as a matter of course, offered his arm to Susan.

It was a very pleasant dinner to Susan. Mr. Egerton made himself even more agreeable than she had anticipated; and she could forgive him his first tone of indifference when she saw how often his eye wandered to the lower end of the table, where Helen, out of the reach of Lady Augusta's surveillance, and feeling quite at ease with her father, was talking merrily to Captain Mordaunt.

She felt sure that he was converted, though he might be too proud to own it. It would indeed have been a marvellous stoicism which could resist the attraction of Helen's face when animated by conversation. Such winning variety and intelligence were to be seen in every look and gesture, tempered by an innate simple dignity, that put aside all notion of wishing to attract attention! It was a dangerous vicinity for the young guardsman; and Claude Egerton smiled to himself as he saw the evident admiration which Helen was exciting, whilst the conversation on her part was carried on as easily as if she had been talking to her brother.

"Hollow hearted!" thought Claude; "what a pity!" and he

addressed himself to Susan with renewed pleasure from the supposed contrast.

The ladies sat but a short time after dinner; yet Lady Augusta had cast many uneasy glances at the lower end of the table before she ventured to make the move. It was contrary to her tactics that Helen should be so far removed from her, and so much at ease with her neighbour; and she did not thoroughly like the low and rather confidential tone which was springing up between Claude and Susan. It was an absurdity to suppose there could be any thing in it; Susan was so very commonplace, and Claude was fastidious to a fault; but then men were so foolish! And Lady Augusta, with habitual caution, broke up the party and went to the drawing-room.

The wearisome hour after dinner, the attempts at conversation, happily diverted by the entrance of coffee, the stiff circle which will form itself, in spite of all efforts, the ceremonious politeness of old ladies, and the spasmodic attempts at mirth of young ones, no one need describe. They are parts of the unhappy experience of all diners-out. Lady Augusta was proverbially solemn on these occasions, and even Mrs. Graham's ease failed to infect the ladies as it had the gentlemen. Every one seemed afraid of the sound of her own voice, whilst discoursing upon the uninteresting affairs of the world in general, or murmuring trite observations over books of engravings. The gossiping trifles of the neighbourhood were scarcely mentioned. They awoke no interest at Ivors. Except Mrs. Graham and Susan, no one cared for any person out of the Clare set; and the mention of other individuals was received with a careless "Oh! we don't know them," which effectually put an end to the subject. Alone with Helen, Susan would have been quite happy; but in the drawing-room, with Lady Augusta's eye upon her, Helen was a very different person from what she was in the dining-room. Cold, indifferent, almost supercilious, she sat apart, languidly turning over a book of prints for the benefit of Miss Hume, with an air which plainly said, "I do it because I cannot help myself;" whilst Miss Hume, being shy and very much afraid of the surprisingly beautiful and accomplished Miss Clare, who had been brought up on such a superior system, was naturally enough awed into dullness, and could remember no words in her native tongue, but "yes, very pretty," until Helen, in despair, relinquished the prints, and gave herself up to reverie.

The entrance of the gentlemen had no effect upon her; her spirits were gone, and she saw no reason for exerting herself against her inclination.

Captain Mordaunt, full of the pleasant consciousness of having made an agreeable impression, came up to her, but received only the answer which actual civility demanded, and retired, disconcerted. Lady Augusta called her attention to something which Sir John Hume was saying, and Helen bent forward, and listened for a moment, and then sank back languidly in her chair. Lord Warnford paid her some old-fashioned bantering compliment, and she laughed very good-humouredly, but could not possibly exert herself to give back a repartee to a deaf old man of eighty; and, at length, to the astonishment of all but Susan, she addressed herself suddenly to her father, and insisted upon his giving an account of the political meeting at Wingfield, and the prospects of the next election.

"Very like her!" was Susan's amused comment; but Susan had known Helen from infancy, and did her justice. Other people did not, especially when Claude Egerton, tempted by the politics in which he was just then so interested, joined in the conversation, and Helen was herself again,—brilliant, excited, full of quick observation, and amusing remarks.

Lady Hume frowned as she sat in the corner by the fire, and thought it sad that so young a girl should be such a flirt; and the Admiral muttered to himself, "Ay! plenty to say, when it's worth her while; but he's too sharp to be caught;" whilst Mrs. Graham, with kindly tact, left the Admiral's side at the risk of offending, and took part in the conversation, because she did not like Helen, though unconsciously, to make herself an object of notice.

"Susan, child, what have you been doing with yourself?" asked the Admiral, gruffly, seizing upon Susan, when he found himself left alone, and making her sit down beside him.

"Looking at etchings, part of the time, sir; and talking to Miss Hume about some new work which she is going to show me how to do. That won't interest you much, I am afraid. Drinking coffee, too, and searching for some music for Miss Mary Hume to play."

"Doing the honours of the house," said the Admiral; "why does not your friend there exert herself?"

Susan laughed. "She is doing all she can, sir."

"All she likes, you mean. I hate girls who have nothing to say, except when they like. Beauty indeed! I would not give a fig for good looks without good manners."

The Admiral was always rather careless in his speech; not hearing very well himself, he fancied that others partook his infirmity.

His last observation was made so loudly that it attracted the attention of several persons, amongst others of Claude Egerton, whose conversation had just been interrupted by an order from Lady Augusta that Helen should sing.

"Whose manners are you finding fault with, my dear sir?" he inquired, laughingly, as he drew near. "We are all wishing to know."

Susan looked up at him warningly. "It is not a very new remark," she observed. "It need not apply to any one in particular."

"I don't always understand what people mean by good manners," said a voice behind Susan.

Helen was searching amongst the books on the table for a piece of manuscript music.

Claude addressed himself to her directly. — "Good manners, I suppose, are the manners of a good heart."

"That can't be. I have known the worst people with the best manners."

"Try them under all circumstances:—a lady is a lady to her milliner and her maid; a gentleman is a gentleman to his groom."

Helen considered a moment. "Possibly; you were always fond of definitions;" and she walked away.

"I don't call that good manners," muttered the Admiral;—breaking into a conversation, and then running off."

"Only that Helen's manners must be good," said Susan. She spoke in a very low tone, so that only Claude could hear.

He stood thoughtful.

"Every one who knows her agrees with me," she said earnestly, and expecting his assent.

"I must take time to judge," was the reply; and he followed Helen to the piano.

Lady Augusta had watched them. A very slight change passed over her face: no one would have understood that it was triumph. But she sat herself down by the Admiral, and began discoursing upon Claude Egerton's talents, and the delight it was to her to find that he had at last made up his mind, if possible, to enter Parliament.

Claude placed himself at some distance from the piano. He was passionately fond of music of a peculiar kind. He cared little for what is called good singing, and this was all he expected from Helen. It was curiosity more than any other feeling which made him follow her.

The song began;—it was German;—fashionable, therefore,

Claude thought,—and the first notes were faint. He took up a book of prints, and Susan observed him, and fancied he was not attending. The voice strengthened; its notes came forth full, rich, surpassingly sweet,—with such depth of feeling,—such simple intensity of expression,—they needed no words. It was not language,—it was the voice of the soul which spoke.

Claude remained with the book in his hand, cold—absent apparently,—only his eye never moved from the spot on which it had first been fixed. When Helen had finished, he went up to her and said, “Thank you; I like that very much.”

“Do you? I am glad,—I like it too.” But Helen’s eye had lost its sparkle, and she sat for some seconds silent, forgetting, it seemed, where she was, and then moved from the piano.

“Susan, my love, we have not heard you,” said Lady Augusta in her blandest manner; cutting short a request which was upon Sir Henry’s lips, that Miss Hume would favour them with another piece.

“It is not fair to ask Susan after Helen,” said Mrs. Graham. “She does very little more than sing to amuse me.”

“Oh! but those simple songs, after all, are so charming! and Susan’s voice is sweetly touching.”

Poor Susan! If one thing more than another could have chilled her feelings, it would have been to be told that her voice was sweetly touching. Laughing at Helen as she passed her, and telling her that she would not compete with her in the mournful line, she sat down and sang a Jacobite song, which delighted old Lord Warnford and excited Sir Henry to applause, but made Claude Egerton walk away to the other end of the room that he might be spared the necessity of a compliment. He had an antipathy to Scotch music, as some people have an antipathy to cheese.

Lady Augusta’s good humour increased. Her praise of Susan was unbounded; Mrs. Graham was amused; and the Admiral observed, testily, that she was a very good girl, and had a good strong voice. He didn’t see there was any thing wonderful in it.

The evening was now drawing to a close. Mrs. Graham’s carriage had been announced, and she was only waiting for the conclusion of Miss Hume’s brilliant piece to depart. Helen and Susan were sitting together for the first time that evening.

“Oh, society!” said Helen, and she sighed.

“Country society you mean,” replied Susan.

“All society! all—every thing!”

“You are tired; a night’s rest will put it all right.”

"Will it?—I don't know." Helen put her hand over her brow.
 "You have a headache, I fear," said Claude, perceiving the action, and coming up to her. His manner was full of real interest.

"Thank you, no,—not headache."

"Only heartache," said Susan, lightly, "because the world is not as agreeable as it should be."

"Have you begun to find that?" asked Claude.

"Every one has, I suppose."

"Not every one," observed Susan: "the world is very agreeable to me."

"You are one of the very few persons I have heard say so," replied Claude with a smile.

"I can't like what I don't understand," said Helen; "I never can make out what the use of the world is."

Susan smiled. "Perhaps the world would have an equal difficulty in discovering our use," she said; "but there is mamma wishing Lady Augusta good night. Dear Helen! I hope the world will be agreeable to you to-morrow." She shook hands affectionately with Helen, cordially with Mr. Egerton, and went to her mother.

"So good!" said Helen, looking after her.

"Yes! I should think so." Claude's manner was abstracted.

"I should like to ask you a question, Miss Clare."

"Certainly, if you wish it, Mr. Egerton."

The names sounded so formal, that they both laughed.

Lady Augusta came up, and Susan with her, searching for a glove.

"Quite like the old times," was Lady Augusta's observation.

"Not quite, whilst we *Miss Clare* and *Mr. Egerton* each other," said Claude.

"Oh! absurd! Such old friends! cousins!" replied Lady Augusta.

Claude was going to speak, but hesitated. Helen assisted him.

"I am quite willing it should be 'Helen,'" she said; "it is much more natural."

Claude bowed, and said thank you, rather coldly.

"And I am sure Claude is more natural," observed Lady Augusta. "Even you, Susan dear, must remember what a playmate Claude, as you used to call him, was when you were children."

"Mr. Egerton, is more natural now," said Susan, quietly; and Claude started, as though just awakening to the fact of her presence, and offering his arm, went with her to the carriage.

CHAPTER VIII.

CLAUDE EGERTON went home to dream neither of Helen nor of Susan, but of the duties of a member of Parliament, and the disagreeables connected with a contested election. If his project was to be carried out, his stay at the Lodge would probably be but short. The seat for the town of Ramsay might be vacant at any moment, the present member having openly announced his intention of retiring on account of ill health, and it would be necessary to make arrangements for canvassing immediately. It was very unpleasant to him, extremely contrary to his taste, and all the old objections presented themselves again. But he was not as some men are, so fully alive to the difficulties of the path on either side, that they stand still in the middle and take neither. One of the many lessons taught him by the Admiral had been that of making a choice in all things. Men sin, not because they choose, but because they don't choose, was the old man's frequent axiom : and Claude's experience had fully taught him its truth. The actions which, in looking back upon his life he saw the most reason to deplore, were those in which, instead of manfully facing the conflicting claims of duty and inclination, he had suffered himself to pause in indecision, thinking he was standing still, whilst in fact the current of evil, so much stronger always than that of good, was bearing him on to the point from whence there was no retreat.

The present question was not one which involved what the world would call right or wrong ; but in Claude Egerton's eyes public duty was to be regarded in the same light as private, to be decided according to the same rules, and carried out according to the same principles.

He thought over the subject again, as a Christian only can think ; trusting neither to the honesty of his own intentions nor the flattering opinions of his friends, but seeking that his judgment should be guided by God ; and in the morning when he met the Admiral at breakfast his resolution was finally made known. He would walk over that morning, he said, to Ivors, consult Sir Henry as to the details of his proceedings, and if necessary, go down immediately to Ramsay, and with the assistance of his friends, begin his course of operations.

Poor Lady Augusta would have been considerably disappointed, if she had known how little either Helen or herself had to do with

Mr. Egerton's early morning visit. It happened to be a thoroughly wet day, the rain coming down with that quiet decision which makes the expectation of blue sky as hopeless as the attempt to combat the strong determination of a very soft-spoken and gentlemanly woman. The arrival of a gentleman in a mackintosh before luncheon, betokened some urgent purpose or inclination, and Lady Augusta, hearing Claude's voice in the hall, went out to meet him.

"To walk over on such a wet day! How very good of you, my dear Claude! You must be wet through. Do let them take away that dripping coat; and won't you have a little wine,—wine and water,—brandy?—don't be ashamed. You will certainly take cold."

Claude disburdened himself leisurely of his mackintosh, and handed it to the servant, assuring Lady Augusta at the same time that she need not be in the least uneasy; he was quite dry, the walk was nothing. He had come hoping to find Sir Henry at home.

Lady Augusta's countenance fell a little; but Sir Henry was doubtless a mere excuse. "He is at home, I think, I am not sure; we will inquire. But you will come into the drawing-room, the ladies will be quite glad to be enlivened by a visitor."

The last thing Claude would have desired, except,—yes, he had a little wish to see whether Helen were as lovely in her morning as in her evening dress. As for Lady Hume and her daughters, he considered them, just then,—though it was a most uncourteous opinion,—very much in the way.

He followed Lady Augusta because he could not help himself, thinking painfully, as he walked by her side, how little her kindness could deceive him now as to her real character.

Helen was not in the drawing-room; she had been there a few minutes before, but was gone. Claude was as disappointed as he could be in regard to any thing about which he cared so little as seeing or not seeing her, but Lady Augusta was restless. She began by introducing Claude with a kind of badinage upon his early visit, but still her eyes wandered round and round the room, first to one door, then the other. It was the consciousness of her secret wishes which made her hesitate to ask what had become of Helen. Miss Hume was drawing, copying some flowers from nature, very well. Claude's straightforward gentlemanlike manner put every one at ease with him; and when he admired them, she was pleased, and feeling thankful for encouragement which she rarely received, showed him some others which she

had been trying the previous day. He did not think her so much in the way then; any thing that was unpretending, and was inclined to open to him, awoke an interest. But Lady Augusta had not the least intention of allowing him to be interested in any one but Helen, though it might be only for a moment, and with poor, plain, dull Miss Hume. She ingeniously diverted the conversation from the portfolio to the conservatory, keeping flowers still on the *tapis*; and Claude was called upon to give his opinion upon a rare Australian plant which the gardener had just succeeded in raising from seed. This drew him from Miss Hume, and was an excuse for going through the ante-room and the library, into the conservatory, where probably Helen might be found, it being her usual refuge from visitors.

They lingered in the library. Claude's attention was attracted by a bust upon a little table. It was like Helen, but not very like. He asked whether it was intended for her.

"Dear child! yes, but it is a failure. A bust of her must be, it wants life, and she has so much."

"Not very much this morning, mamma," said Helen's voice, issuing from Lady Augusta's recess. "I am so comfortable and so lazy here."

"Silly child! how tiresome of you to run away. Here is Mr. Egerton come to see you!"

"And very sorry to disturb you," said Claude, coming in front of the recess.

Helen was seated on the cushioned window seat, cushions behind her, a footstool at her feet, a book in her lap, the very image of indolent enjoyment. She moved a little as Claude came up to her, but expressed scarcely civil pleasure at the sight of him.

Claude failed to remark her manner, he was looking at her countenance and dress, as he might have looked at a picture. They quite satisfied his taste, and were even so pleasant to him, that when Lady Augusta sat down for an instant, he sat down also; contented to delay his conversation with Sir Henry, for the gratification of having an object before his eyes so gracefully pretty as Helen in her morning dress.

"I must scold you, child," said Lady Augusta, in her playful, fondling tone; a tone which from some unacknowledged cause made the blood creep in Claude Egerton's veins. "You really are too naughty; the sound of a bell seems to scare you."

"It was not the sound of the bell," replied Helen; "It was the Hume prosing: I could bear it no longer."

"So dreadfully fastidious! What shall we do with her, Claude? She likes no one."

"Because there is no one to like," continued Helen, — "at least here. Who could like Miss Hume?"

"Who could dislike her?" asked Claude, quietly.

"Well! exactly. One never likes people whom one couldn't dislike,—vegetables, without flavours."

"That is the reason, I suppose, why it is necessary to use so much salt in discussing them," said Claude, in the same unimpressive tone, which gave no clue as to whether he were speaking in jest or earnest.

Lady Augusta was not certain that the conversation was taking a safe course. Helen could be so very severe, and she was doubtful if Claude liked severity in a woman. She interposed: "My love, you really must learn to be more charitable; you are spoilt. London society has done the mischief, Claude. One can really collect such first-rate people about one there; clever, scientific, really good people. I confess myself that the country is very stupid after it."

"I don't find it more stupid than London," said Helen; "of all things I hate fashionable parties."

"Agreed, cordially," exclaimed Claude.

Lady Augusta thought the subject more hopeful, and pursued it. "At any rate, my dear, you can't compare London to country society. London may be foolish, but it certainly is not dull."

"Not dull, when one takes the trouble to laugh at it," said Helen; "but I don't know whether that is a good thing to do," and she sighed.

"I must leave Claude to fathom the mystery of that sigh," observed Lady Augusta; "and go and talk to Sir Henry about something he asked me to remind him of. Wait for me one moment here, Claude, and I will tell him you wish to see him."

Claude felt he must be patient. He rose, and stood, leaning against the wall, waiting for Helen to speak, whilst, with her face towards the window, she was watching the dripping of the rain upon the gravel. When, after a few seconds, she again turned it towards him, he was painfully struck with a change in its expression. He would have called it haggard, if the word could have been applied to any thing so young and fresh. Mentally haggard it was, certainly. "Such a dreary, dreary day," she murmured, as she closed her book.

"Yes, but I think it will clear by and by."

"Do you?" and she smiled sarcastically. "You are more hopeful than I am."

"There is a peep of blue sky in the north-east."

"The wrong quarter; these rains always go on. Oh! Lady Hume!"

"It must be trying," said Claude, in a tone of compassion.

Helen noticed it. "I don't want pity," she said. "It is not Lady Hume, nor any one, really."

"The dull book, perhaps," continued Claude.

"The book is a novel." He looked grave.

"You disapprove of novels?"

"Only under certain circumstances."

"Then not under mine. I couldn't exist without fiction."

"Reality is so dull, I suppose," said Claude.

"Yes, but it ought not to be so, ought it?"

She spoke frankly and earnestly, and Claude answered in the same way, "Perhaps it never is, except through our own fault."

"It is pleasant to Susan," said Helen, with an air of thought; "she said so last night. But then she has so many to love her."

"I was going to ask,"—Claude hesitated,—"perhaps you remember I was going to ask a question last night?"

"Were you?" said Helen, indifferently. "I forget."

"I have just remembered it," continued Claude. "You said last night that you could not make out the use of the world. I wished at the time you would explain yourself."

"Oh, impossible! Explain my own words! You may as well ask me to explain my own mind. But the world is a puzzle."

"A great one, unless one has found the clue to it."

"Which means that you have found it. You are wiser than I am," said Helen,

A momentary silence followed, then she added, suddenly, "why are you going into Parliament?"

"For a great many reasons, which it would take a great deal of time to explain," he replied.

Helen was piqued, and answered with petulance, "I have no wish to pry into mysteries."

"There is no mystery," he said, coldly; "only a question of comparative duties, which would be very uninteresting to you."

"I don't see why they should be. I like to hear people talk of duties. It is so amusing to watch the difference between their theory and their practice."

"I should be sorry to feel that you could watch the difference in me," replied Claude, "so you must forgive me if I decline giving you the opportunity."

His manner was so entirely unlike any thing to which Helen had been accustomed, that she felt very much inclined to be angry.

But the good-humoured, kindly expression of Claude's face softened her in spite of herself. "I see you despise me too much to talk to me," she said, laughing. "You were always a philosopher."

"I despise myself rather. I dread inconsistency; and I know you would be the first to mark it."

"I don't thank you for the compliment. I only like truth."

"We are agreed on that point at least," replied Claude, earnestly.

"That and disliking fashionable society," said Helen. "Two points only."

"But truth is the foundation of all," continued Claude; "so there is hope for us."

"No," said Helen, gravely; "you will never agree with me. There is nothing to agree with; only in thinking that it is a dreary day." She turned her head again towards the window.

Lady Augusta came back before another word was spoken, and Claude Egerton was a few moments afterwards closeted with Sir Henry, and engrossed in politics.

Claude forgot Helen, but Helen did not quite so soon forget Claude. The very fact of his coldness made her remember him. Her last recollections of him, derived from the days when she felt that she was a child, were of a good-tempered, kind companion, who would laugh and talk with her, go for long walks, and ride races in the park; and she expected to find him now an easy agreeable man of the world, who would help to keep up her spirits on a wet day, and with whom she might carry on as much repartee as suited her. But Claude, to own the truth, could not be called very agreeable. People listened to him, because what he had to say was generally worth listening to; but he had very little small-talk, and, unless he was interested in a subject, was much more in the habit of being silent than of conversing. His indifference, too, was perplexing to Helen. She had been accustomed lately to such an amount of homage for her beauty, that she expected it quite as a matter of course, and felt surprise at not receiving it, as she might have done if the labourers on her father's property had neglected to take off their hats to her. It was simply surprise, not conceit or mortified vanity. Helen never realised to herself why she was so courted. Admiration came to her as if it had been her birthright. She only felt that it was strange to meet with some one who was evidently not in the least devoted to her, and quite as willing to leave her as to be with her. It made

Claude interesting rather than otherwise, and she sat for nearly half an hour in the library window, thinking how odd "some people" were,—some people meaning Claude; wondering what made them so; wondering what objects and interests such persons could have; with a good many other thoughts of the same kind, ending in her going to the drawing-room, and finding Captain Mordaunt there, quizzing what he called the Egerton solemnity, joining in the laugh till her spirits were so raised that Lady Hume, from her sofa corner, again shook her head, and lamented that Helen should be such a flirt; and at last retiring to her own room, disgusted with herself, and unable even to find interest in her novel, because she had a secret misgiving that Claude would think it an unprofitable expenditure of time.

Poor Helen! that was by no means an unusual state of mind on a wet day. If it had not been caused by Claude, it would have been probably by some one or something else. She had many resources but very few interests, for she had none with whom to share them. She was indifferent to Lady Augusta's friends, and had never been allowed to make any of her own. As for the families living near Ivors, they might as well have been in Australia for any thing she thought or cared about them. She knew no one except as a distant acquaintance. And even her cousins at Wingfield were scarcely more to her in the way of companionship. They were too busy at home to be often spared, even if they had been often invited to Ivors, which they certainly were not.

Lady Augusta's dread of evil and its contamination had unquestionably worked for good in one way. Helen's mind was as pure and simple at nineteen as at nine. But whether that were due only to the system which had isolated her from communion with her fellow-creatures, might have been doubted by those who looked at Susan Graham; open-hearted, open-handed, visiting the poor, giving a kindly thought to the rich, free to come or go, to form little plans for amusement or occupation with her sisters and her friends, which called forth independent energy, already preparing for any future duties which years and the events of life might bring upon her, yet as pure, as simple as Helen; with this only difference, that whereas Helen had scarcely ever heard of many common forms of evil and their consequences, Susan had been told so much and no more as would open her heart to sympathy, and give her the discretion required to deal with them wisely, whenever, in the course of circumstances, they might be brought more immediately before her.

"Helen will be forced to see so much that is disagreeable if

she is allowed to go into cottages," was Lady Augusta's excuse for not permitting her daughter to do what in fact she never did herself. And so Helen knew nothing of the labourers or their wives and children; but she stayed at home, and read very pretty religious stories about the poor, and now and then, when there was nothing else very particular to do, made a child's frock, and on the occasion of any general subscription put down her name for a large sum, paid by her father, because it was not to be expected that she should give so much out of her allowance. She had no idea that she was in any way neglecting her duties. She was unaware that any thing more was required of her.

But her mind preyed upon itself. It had a constant craving which could never be satisfied. Full of talent, poetry, enthusiasm, by nature tender-hearted and sympathetic, yet Helen lived only for herself. She read, worked, drew, talked, — but self was the one object, and it was insufficient to satisfy her. Lady Augusta complained, and said that Helen was indolent: most true, but she had been made so. Pursuits which would have been interesting when carried on with others with a view to some useful or pleasant end, lost their charm when followed for no definite purpose, and were thrown aside. So also she was changeable. Every thing which gave her a new impulse was adopted, merely because it was excitement, and excitement was life, and Helen's life was dead. True, candid, open as the day, by the disposition which God had bestowed upon her, yet her existence was an unreality—a perpetual discordance between principle and practice—which she had learnt to laugh at, because it was exhibited before her in the persons whom the lessons of her childhood had taught her should be regarded with respect.

Helen Clare was a problem to herself and to others. .

CHAPTER IX.

"MAMMA, Mr. Egerton is returned for Ramsay; are n't you glad?" Anna Graham came into the little study, where Mrs. Graham and Susan were writing, and Isabella reading. "Returned, are you sure?" Susan's pen was laid down, and she addressed her sister with an eagerness which made Anna laugh.

"One would think you were going to be returned yourself, Susan. Yes, I am sure, quite; I heard it from Lady Augusta and

Helen. They were at Grant's, shopping, and I went in as I came from Mrs. Lowrie's to buy some French cotton for Mrs. Berry. You don't mind my going in, dear mamma, do you?"

"Not at all my love; I don't imagine you will come to any mischief by buying French cotton. But tell us what Lady Augusta said."

"Oh! she was in high spirits, and so gracious! She talked of coming here to call and tell you all about it. Helen says Mr. Egerton made a grand speech; and he came in with an immense majority. 'Quite a political triumph!' Lady Augusta called it. Helen's eyes sparkled, and she talked so fast! I never saw people in such a state."

"Or who made others in such a state," said Mrs. Graham, laughing. "I shall object to your buying French cotton for the future, Anna, if the consequences are so alarming."

"It will be pleasant to see Helen excited," said Susan; "she has been always depressed lately."

"I don't see why she should be," observed Isabella in a melancholy tone. "I am sure she has enough to make her happy."

Mrs. Graham replied to this remark by a slight sigh, observed only by Susan.

"She never is happy—not what I call happy,"—observed Anna. "I wouldn't live the life that she does if you would give me fifty thousand instead of ten thousand a year. Dear mamma! I am so thankful that we are not too grand to be useful:" and Anna threw her arms around her mother's neck, and kissed her.

"It is not grandeur, Anna, which prevents persons from being useful," said Mrs. Graham: "you will learn that by and by. Some of the grandest people—as you would call them—that I have ever known have been the most useful."

"Not when they thought about their grandeur, though," said Anna.

"Helen never *thinks* of her grandeur," observed Susan.

"She only *feels* it," said Mrs. Graham. "Education has done that. Helen is naturally exceedingly unassuming, but she has been kept aloof from every one till she looks down upon them, and takes no interest in them, simply because she knows nothing about them."

"Lady Augusta never intended to make her proud," said Isabella. "I have heard her preach quite a sermon upon humility."

"So have I," said Mrs. Graham; and a smile passed over her face, which she checked almost immediately.

"What is the use of preaching humility and practising pride?" murmured Susan in an under tone, whilst she went on with her writing.

"I don't think we are the better for discussing Lady Augusta," said Mrs. Graham. — "Anna, love, I wanted you, if you have time to-day, to do something for me."

"Dear mamma! yes — any thing;" and Anna leaned over her mother fondly, and added, "I always have time for you."

"I want you to make up the account of the subscription for Kate Hope, and copy it out. Let me see; — I think there must be six copies at least. — I dare say Isabella will help."

Isabella said "Yes," but not with great alacrity.

"And Susan must give me some books from the lending library for Mrs. Lowrie's servants," said Anna, "I promised her she should have them."

"The books want covering," observed Susan, "and I have not had time to do them."

"Isabella shall cover them," said Anna, "and I will manage Kate Hope's account; I can do it quite well."

Susan turned to her mother. "Mamma, I don't know what you will say, but I half-promised Mrs. Lowrie that her girl, Harriet Pearce, should come and read with our little maid on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Mrs. Lowrie says that it would be such a comfort to her to feel that she had some one besides herself to teach Harriet. Should you object? I said I would talk to you about it."

"Not at all, my love, if you like it. It is not much more trouble to teach two than one."

"Mrs. Berry has been talking to us again about an elder class from the Sunday-school girls," said Anna; "but I told her I was afraid we could scarcely begin it this winter."

"I don't think we can possibly," said Susan, who took in all that was said, whilst her pen moved tolerably fast.

"The days are so short," continued Anna; "and after we have had our school-room work in the morning there really is not daylight enough for any thing, except just seeing one or two people, and going for a rushing walk on the Ivors road."

"Unless we were to dine later," observed Mrs. Graham. "Dinner takes up such a great deal of time in the middle of the day."

"I can't bear altering the dinner-hour," said Isabella; "it is so unnatural."

"If we dined at half-past five we might have the class for an hour before," said Susan.

"Yes, that might do : the girls ought not to be out later than five or six," said Mrs. Graham.

"No ; that was what Mrs. Berry said," observed Anna. "I should like to manage it, if one could. Mr. Berry is so anxious about it : he says that it would be keeping a hold upon them to make them feel they had ladies looking after them. And, mamma, do you know, he has had such good accounts of Jessie Dawson,—the girl with the burnt face, you remember,—whom I taught to knit last spring. Her face is quite well, and she has a place as kitchen maid with Mrs. Berry's aunt ; and she sends her particular duty to me. Isn't that grand ?" And Anna drew herself up playfully, whilst her cheek flushed with pleasure at the consciousness of having done something to deserve gratitude.

"I don't think elder classes or younger ones will flourish much, if we spend so much time in talking about them," said Mrs. Graham. "What a chatterer you are, Anna."

"Only I must tell you, dear mamma ; you know we can't set to work without you. Oh dear ! what a great deal there is to do in the world ! I will just go and take off my things, and then come and make up Kate Hope's account. I suppose we sha'n't go out this afternoon, it is coming on to rain."

"I want you to come to my room one minute, Anna," said Susan, "and to bring me your scrap-bag. Mamma wants some linen for the almshouses, and I want some for Mrs. Lowrie, and if we are not going out we must send it."

"Make haste then. Lady Augusta will be here in a minute. Why are people so tiresome as to call when one is busy ?" And Anna hurried out of the room, followed by Susan.

Isabella sat with her book before her, apparently reading. "My love, all this talking must disturb you," said Mrs. Graham. "Why don't you go into the dining-room ? there is a fire there."

"I would rather stay here, thank you, dear mamma," replied Isabella, scarcely raising her eyes.

Mrs. Graham watched her, and saw a tear drop upon the page. She went up to her and kissed her. "Unhappy, my child ?" she said tenderly, yet not anxiously.

"No, dear mamma, it is nothing ; it is really nothing." Isabella brushed her hand across her eyes.

"Only the old malady," said Mrs. Graham.

Isabella half smiled. "It really is nothing ; please don't ask me ; I know I ought to be happy."

"Yes, indeed you ought ; you have every thing to make you so."

"Except people's love," said Isabella, bitterly.

"My dear child, that is wrong. You have love ; as much as any human being has the least right to wish for ; my love, your sisters', your brother's ; the love of friends too."

"Yes, secondary love," said Isabella. "Dear mamma! — and she clung to her mother, conscious of the seeming ingratitude of her words — "I know you love me, — but I don't deserve it."

"We none of us deserve any love," replied Mrs. Graham.

"But I am not like Susan and Anna. I am disagreeable ; I make you unhappy."

"Never, except by being unhappy yourself," said Mrs. Graham.

"And I never shall be like them," continued Isabella. "I shall never have any one to love me best."

"I suppose they would be puzzled to find out any one who loves them best," said Mrs. Graham. "Certainly it would not be their mother."

"Dearest mamma, you are so good, so very kind ; but I don't think you can understand, — I don't think any one can."

"I think I can," said Mrs. Graham, as she fondly smoothed her child's glossy hair ; adding, "once upon a time, Isabella, I had the same fancies."

"You, mamma? Impossible. You must always have been loved."

"Yes, as you are : but the love was thrown away upon me. Your dear aunt, Helen's mother, was a more attractive person than I was ; she was beautiful, as Helen is, and very clever, and she was the elder, and so was brought more forward ; and at length I became, not exactly envious, — I was too fond of her to be that, — but discontented. I was out of health too, that had something to do with it. I used to get into low spirits for no reason, and very often I made this an excuse to myself for being really ill-humoured."

Just at this instant Susan looked in at the door, but went away again directly. Isabella started up, afraid of being remarked. When the door was closed, she said eagerly, "And who helped you, mamma?"

"A curious person, — an old nurse," said Mrs. Graham. "She found me one evening crying in my own room, and asked me what was the matter. I said, as you do, that I didn't know ; that I was very unhappy, and nobody loved me ; and a good deal more of the same kind, more indeed than you would say, because I had been allowed to have my own way as a child, and had but little notion of self-control. She let me go on for a long time, and listened quietly, and at last — I think I see her now — she shook

her head, and said, 'Ah! Miss Frances, self comes first, and self is never satisfied.'

"I don't know what she meant," said Isabella, a little moodily.

"Exactly my own words; though I doubt if they were quite sincere. She did not immediately explain them, but went on questioning me, in her strict, short way, as to what I had been doing all the day; what I had read, and where I had walked, and what work I had done; and at every answer she said, 'Well, and whom did that please?' And in almost every case I was obliged to answer, myself. Nurse took my hand, and said, solemnly, 'Poor child! myself is a hard tyrant.'"

Isabella looked up as if about to speak, but hesitated.

"I know what you would say," replied Mrs. Graham. "You think it does not apply to you; and, in a certain way, that is true. For me, I had been ill and depressed; and fancying that I had a right to amuse myself and distract my thoughts if I could, I had literally lived only for myself. I had read for my own pleasure, worked to gratify my own fancy, talked or been silent, walked or stayed at home, entirely to please myself. I gave no pleasure to others, and as a natural result they gave no pleasure to me, and I fancied they didn't care for me."

"But, mamma, I do work for others," said Isabella.

"Because you are obliged: there is very little voluntary effort."

"I do the things; I can't help their being unpleasant to me," was the reply.

"Yes, dear child; excuse me, you can help it. If your thoughts were right, your feelings would be right. Just tell me, do you ever give yourself the trouble of *planning* what you can do to please or help others?"

"There is no occasion; I am generally told what I am to do," said Isabella.

"Then I have very much failed in the object of my life," observed Mrs. Graham, sadly. "My one chief desire has been to educate you so that you might have independent springs of action, and work without being told."

"But the work does the same good to others, whether you plan it or I do," said Isabella.

"Possibly; though upon that point I have a doubt. But as regards yourself, nothing interests us which is not attended by some voluntary effort. If you give yourself the trouble to plan what you can do for others your work will become interesting; otherwise it is simply mechanical. What is defective in you, my child, is less selfishness in action than in feeling. The first step towards right feeling is made in the management of the thoughts."

"But all the work in the world will not procure me love," persisted Isabella.

"Not the work, but the unselfishness, the kind-hearted, benevolent feeling which is always thinking of others and forgetting itself will. I will tell you again about myself. That speech of nurse's had a great effect upon me: it made me look into my heart, and discover what a great fault I had been indulging. I set to work resolutely against it, and I hope in the right way, for I was really influenced by religious principle. I tried first for one day, making it my decided object to do every thing which I could think of that would give pleasure to others; not merely leaving undone selfish actions, but doing thoughtful and considerate ones. My mind became interested, and I had no leisure to dwell upon the fancy that no one loved me. The next morning I made a resolution for two days, then for a week, and at last for a month. I grew much happier, and could not help seeing that every one was kinder than before, and more glad to be with me and talk to me: and at the end of six months I was actually startled to find how much love was bestowed upon me. Since then the burden of my life has been, not that I have so little love, but so much which I can never deserve."

"But *best*, mamma," said Isabella; "to be loved *best*!"

"Dear child, we must talk of that another time. Here is Lady Augusta's carriage; only when we give our own *best* love where alone it is due, we shall never complain that it is not returned."

A thundering knock and ring made Isabella start from her seat, and rush away through a door which opened into the dining-room, just as Lady Augusta Clare and Miss Clare were announced in the study.

CHAPTER X.

LADY AUGUSTA'S glance around the small apartment was most patronising. She was evidently in the best possible humour.

"You really look so extremely comfortable here, my dear Mrs. Graham; so usefully employed. Quite a charming little room, is n't it, Helen?"

"The room looks as it always does," said Helen, bluntly; but the next moment she added, "Aunt Fanny's rooms always do look more comfortable than any others."

"I don't know why, I am sure, my dear," said Mrs. Graham. "I never particularly piqued myself upon the art of arranging furniture. But you are come with good news, I hear," she continued, addressing Lady Augusta.

"Yes, dear Claude is returned member for Ramsay. Such a delight to us! and I thought I must be the first to come and give you the happy intelligence. The excitement has been so great! too great for dear Helen; she looks quite pale."

"Because I sat up late last night, reading, mamma," said Helen; "not because I am so tremendously rejoiced about Claude. Only as an old friend, you know, Aunt Fanny, one is glad. And then it has been something to talk about, and Ivors has been so very dull; I declare I think I should like to live in a country town." Her eye glanced towards the side window of the little study, from which a view could be had of one of the smaller streets of Wingfield.

"You would have pattens to listen to on a wet day, and muffin-boys' cries," said Mrs. Graham. "I don't know whether you would think them very enlivening."

"I should like them for change: any thing for that. Aunt Fanny, where is Susan?"

"In the house, somewhere, my love. I will ring, and let her know you are here."

"Thank you; but please don't ring. Let me go and find her;" and Helen hurried out of the room, pleased as a child to be free to find her way over the old-fashioned house, and to have the chance of a conversation with Susan without observation.

"She is such a strange child," said Lady Augusta, when Helen left the room. "All that indifference is merely put on. But she will not show her feelings to any one except me. Between ourselves, my dear Mrs. Graham, she has caused me some anxiety lately; of course I would not have an observation made for the world, but her spirits have drooped, without cause apparently, or at least any that the world would see. For myself, I am only too observant; but we must trust it will all be right by and by; in fact I feel convinced it will."

"Helen, being an only daughter, may probably want companionship," was Mrs. Graham's matter-of-fact reply to this mysterious speech.

Lady Augusta grew rather stiff. "I think not. Helen has enough resources to be sufficient for herself. It has been my great aim in her education; and she has no fancy for society; she dislikes it indeed. I had real difficulty in making her go out

in London. In fact, dear child ! she has my tastes. She much prefers scientific and literary pursuits to fashionable amusements."

"She is very simple," replied Mrs. Graham, cautiously.

"Sweetly simple ;" and Lady Augusta's severity relaxed. "As dear Claude was remarking to me only the day before he left us, to go down to Ramsay, she is full of impulse, but it is all natural. You know Claude spent a fortnight with us, just before the election came on. They saw a good deal of each other then. Poor fellow ! it was a great change from Ivors and Helen, to the coarseness and bustle of the election."

A light broke upon Mrs. Graham's mind. She knew that after the first electioneering plans were settled, Claude Egerton had been invited to stay at Ivors, and, as Lady Augusta said, had spent a fortnight there. But she troubled herself very little at any time with Lady Augusta's visitors, and had looked upon Claude's stay as a matter of course, since Sir Henry's advice was likely to be useful to him. Now, she could not but feel that some deeper interest was concerned ; and Lady Augusta, it was clear, wished her to understand the case, though she did not choose to explain herself more clearly. Mrs. Graham was not, however, to be tempted to inquire more particularly into the meaning of what had been said, and contented herself with remarking that Mr. Egerton was likely to be a very hard-working member of Parliament, but she scarcely imagined he would be an eloquent one.

"I don't know. I should say he does n't know his own powers. I have heard him speak remarkably well, when excited. He requires a stimulus, an object. Helen differed from him one night, and he was quite brilliant, and exceedingly clever in his argument. I believe he entirely converted her ; not perhaps that we can consider such a fact astonishing:" and Lady Augusta concluded her sentence with a smile of great meaning.

Provoking Mrs. Graham still would observe nothing, and Lady Augusta continued : "But I must not forget one of my chief objects in calling this afternoon, independent of the pleasure of seeing you. Sir Henry talks of having some festivities in honour of the new member, and to celebrate the Conservative triumph, and he insists upon having you and the dear girls in the house. I told him I thought it would be impossible to persuade you, occupied as you are ; and now that Christmas is so near at hand, and your boy coming home from school, I was afraid it would be full of difficulties ; but he insisted upon my coming, and of course I was only too glad : I trust you will think of it."

Mrs. Graham was very much obliged, and would think of it.

She inquired as to the details of times and seasons, but found that every thing was unsettled. Mr. Egerton might be kept at Ramsay; he might be obliged to go to town; he might have business at his own place, Helmsley; every thing must depend on his movements. Possibly any entertainments might be deferred till after Christmas. Lady Augusta was in a complete maze of uncertainty, took out her watch, discovered that it was extremely late, and was impatient to return home. But she was delighted to have seen dear Mrs. Graham, and hoped soon to have the opportunity of showing the very descriptive letter which Mr. Egerton had written, giving an account of the polling days, and the speeches,—a letter, she added, which Helen had made him promise to write when he went away, and which really was quite a treat. And then the bell was rung for Helen.

CHAPTER XI.

HELEN was not very well versed in the intricacies of Wingfield Court, but she had found her way without much difficulty through one long passage, and down three steps, and through another short passage, to Susan's room, an irregular-shaped, plainly-furnished little apartment, looking out, like the side window of the study, upon the street. Susan was engaged with the scrap-bag; hoards of rags and pieces of linen were turned out of it upon the bed.

"My dear Susan, what are you about?" was Helen's exclamation, as she stumbled into the room over a box containing worn-out sheets, which Susan had just drawn forth from a closet.

"Preparing to keep a rag shop, you would suppose," replied Susan, throwing aside her scraps, and coming forward with a cordial smile on her face, which made Helen, as she kissed her, declare that it was like sunshine to look at her. "I am collecting linen and rags for my old blind friend Mrs. Lowrie. She makes lint for the infirmary, and we always try to keep her supplied."

Helen laughed heartily. "You are the most absurd people, my dear Susan. One would think you had a concern with all the business of all the dwellers on the face of the globe. We shall *hear of your making skins for the Calmuck Tartars next.*"

"Well!" said Susan, "If the Calmuck Tartars settled next door, I suppose we should do our utmost to assist them."

"Oh dear!" and Helen jumped upon the corner of the bed, and made a comfortable support to her back with a bundle of old sheets; "this is a very odd world we live in. Susan aren't you out of your wits with joy because Claude Egerton is member for Ramsay?"

"I don't know;" and Susan put on a look of consideration: "I believe I am very glad."

"Very glad! That isn't half, nor a quarter enough. You are to be in the seventh heaven of felicity. We all are."

"I heard you were," said Susan a little satirically.

"From whom? Oh! I know; that little tell-tale Anna. She entrapped me into a grand description of Claude's speech, and then ran away and laughed at me."

"But you are glad really, Helen?" said Susan, a little perplexed at her cousin's manner.

"Oh! of course. I always am what I ought to be."

"I wish I could say as much of myself," said Susan, smiling; "but I don't understand you now, Helen, any more than I ever do."

"I don't see how you should," replied Helen. "I don't understand myself. The fact is, Susan, I believe I am frightfully perverse. When I am told I am to be glad, I am not glad at all; I am frozen up into an icicle. I shall thaw again though presently."

"You ought to be glad for Sir Henry's sake," said Susan.

"It is a great deal his work, and there are the politics to be considered."

"Oh yes! the great Conservative triumph! What do I care for Conservative triumphs? But I do care for Claude himself,—I like Claude very much: don't you?"

A faint, very faint tinge of deepening colour spread itself over Susan's cheek; but she answered without hesitation, "Yes, I do certainly like him."

"Yes, I do certainly like him," repeated Helen, mimicking her cousin's rather slow tones. "Save me from ever being praised by you, Susan! Why you ought to like him extremely. He likes you."

"Does he?" Susan was seized with the sudden recollection of the claims of her scrap-bag, and busied herself with rolling up strips of linen. Perhaps she might have cared to know how much Claude Egerton liked her, but Helen was not communicative.

"I like him," continued Helen, following, as was her wont, the topic most agreeable to her own mind, "because he makes one think : that is more than most people do. I quarrel with him very often ; we were always quarrelling when he was last at Ivors. I dare say it was my own fault. Susan, dear, I wish I was as good as you are."

"When you are wishing, wish for something better than that."

"No ; I should be quite contented. It would give me just the pleasant, comfortable opinion of myself that I want. Let me have some of those strips, like a good child. I can't bear to see you making a martyr of yourself over them."

"You won't know what to do with them," said Susan. "I venture to say you never rolled up a strip of linen in your life."

"It is time I should learn then. Claude says there is a good deal to be learnt in the world. I believe he thinks that it would be a good thing if I were to set about learning."

"I should agree with him," said Susan, archly.

"Don't preach. I am not in the humour to-day. I only like being preached to on wet days. The words drop then like the rain on the ground ; it all suits. I think, Susan, Claude means to fall in love with Miss Hume."

"Very likely," said Susan, without raising her eyes from her work.

"Very likely ! Susan you are enough to provoke a saint. Prosy, plain, particular, pertinacious, provoking Miss Hume ! It would be a crying sin. I declare when I saw him bring her in flowers to copy, and offer to cut her pencils, I used to run away, it made me so angry. And very wrong it was of him, too ! Lady Hume took it all in, and considers it a settled thing. I would n't answer for it, that she is not at this very moment ordering the trousseau."

"So absurd you are, Helen ! why should n't a gentleman bring flowers for a lady to copy, and cut her pencils for her, if he likes it ?"

"Oh ! but it was all done in that particular way, — Claude Egerton's way. I wish you could see and hear him as I do. That quiet tone, deferential, considerate, — moving rose-leaves out of your way, lest you should stumble over them. Not out of my way, though. He is always at daggers drawn with me."

"No wonder, if you talk in the wild way to him that you do me," replied Susan.

"You don't think I would venture ? No, I assure you, I am

the very pattern of propriety with him; except,—every now and then, I like to startle him. We argued for an hour, one night. Mamma thought he had converted me; not at all—I was of his opinion at the beginning, only I chose to contradict him.”

“He will soon be up to that,” said Susan, “he is quick enough.”

“Will he? I don’t care. It is all in the way of amusement;” and Helen sighed. “What do you do for amusement, Susan?”

“I have so little time for it,” replied Susan, “I don’t quite know. There is always something when I want it.”

“And time seems to me so long. That is one of the points Claude and I can never agree upon. He says there is so much to do in the world, and I say I never can find it out. Would he approve of rolling up strips of linen do you think?”

“You can try: take home some.”

“I would: you may laugh, Susan; but if it was to do you any good I would.”

“Thank you, I am sure you would. But what if it was to do some one else good?”

“*Ça dépend.* Perhaps I should n’t like the person. I can’t work for any one I don’t like.”

“My strips are for old Mrs. Lowrie,” said Susan.

“Or the Queen of the Sandwich Islands!” exclaimed Helen.

“What do I know about old Mrs. Lowrie?”

Susan shook her head. “Ivors spoils you, Helen. I tell you so, often.”

“And Claude says the same,” replied Helen, thoughtfully.

“Most likely then it is true.”

“Most likely. You are both excellent people. I have the greatest possible respect for you.”

“Only you won’t listen to us.”

“I don’t, on principle. The world would be so dull if every one was good.” The drawing-room bell rang, and Helen started up. “A summons for me! Susan we have not said any thing interesting. I meant to say a good deal. When will you come to Ivors?”

“When I am asked, and when mamma will spare me.”

“Claude will be back soon. There are to be great festivities, poor people’s dinners, school tea-drinkings. I would rather have you all to myself.”

“So would I you;—for some reasons,” was added in a lower tone.

“I should be a changed person, if I could stay a month in the house with you, Susan,” continued Helen.

"Then I hope you never will. I shouldn't like you to be changed, except in some things."

"Exceptions more numerous than the rule. You would do more for me than Claude. He looks down upon me."

"Oh, no. Impossible!"

"He does. He is right too. Susan, do you know I am sure I shall never marry. I should die of a good man, and I could never be happy with a bad one."

"Apropos to Mr. Egerton?" asked Susan, laughing.

Helen laughed too. "Not quite; only one day something somebody said put it into my head." Helen jumped down from the bed, unrolling several of Susan's strips of linen, and ran down stairs.

CHAPTER XII.

LADY AUGUSTA went home satisfied; having managed a difficult piece of domestic diplomacy. She had given Sir Henry's family invitation, so as to ease her conscience, yet at the same time leave an opening for limiting it if it should be found desirable. But she had done more than this. Mrs. Graham might feign not to understand her meaning; but Lady Augusta felt that she had dropped a seed which could not fail to take root. Without committing herself to any assertions, she had given the idea that there was at least a mutual feeling of more than liking between Claude and Helen, and this would, she well knew, be quite sufficient to engage all Mrs. Graham's interest for Helen, and prevent the possibility of any rivalry springing up with Susan. For Lady Augusta thought of every thing, was on her guard against every thing, which might interfere with her favourite project. Scheming herself, she gave others credit for being scheming likewise. The possibility that Claude might be attracted by Susan had never left her mind since the day when they sat together at dinner, and she had remarked their confidential tone. What more desirable for Susan? What more likely to be the aim of a person in Mrs. Graham's circumstances? Well-born, well-educated—but poor, and having very little opportunity for bringing her daughters into notice, and settling them, as it is called, advantageously in life. Lady Augusta did not, as many less politic tacticians might have done, seek to destroy any rising interest in Claude's mind by observations detracting from Susan's merits. "If you

wish to make people fall in love, talk about them to each other; praise or dispraise, it is all the same," was her maxim: and acting upon this, she never mentioned Susan's name to Claude, even to find fault with her. But she determined upon a course likely to be more efficacious, — that of so preparing and preoccupying the minds of Mrs. Graham and Susan, that they might as by instinct keep themselves in the background, and leave Claude and Helen together.

For Lady Augusta laughed at Mrs. Graham, patronised, and pretended to look down upon her, but she implicitly trusted her. No worldly prospect would, she knew, for a moment tempt her to place the advantage of her own child in competition with the happiness of another. Once give her the idea that there was any feeling of regard between Claude and Helen, and if it had been the dearest wish of Mrs. Graham's heart which was to be sacrificed to further their interests, it would be given up without the hesitation of a moment. So also as regarded Susan: let her consider the engagement as likely, and any fear of rivalry would at once be at an end. Claude would be an object of indifference, and the indifference would show itself in her manner and conversation. And then; — Lady Augusta knew Claude Egerton well, — slow to believe himself liked; proud, so that he would never trust himself to the risk of rejection; needing, as reserved people generally do, the fascination of ease and animation to unlock the portals of his own affections, Susan would be nothing to him. Lady Augusta's self-congratulations when she reached Ivors, and retired to her own room to meditate upon her morning's work, were by no means few.

And how little Claude Egerton knew or thought of all these manœuvres! He was, so he would certainly have said himself, not at all in love, and not in the least intending to be so. He had spent a fortnight with Helen; but what was the acquaintance of a fortnight when the consequence was to be a question of years? Perhaps he rather piqued himself upon his prudence and stoicism, and knowing that a quick appreciation of beauty, both in nature and art, was likely to be a snare to him, was peculiarly on his guard against it. A beautiful person came before him to a certain extent at a disadvantage; he suspected vanity, and dreaded frivolity; and there might have been a little self-satisfaction (for Claude was but human) in the feeling which had induced him to leave Helen, with her beauty and talents, to gather flowers and cut pencils for plain, uninteresting Miss Hume. The last suspicion which would have crossed his mind was that of having a

shade of feeling for Helen beyond that of friendship because he had known her from a child.

Alas for Claude ! he was in the meshes of the spider's web, and in all the greater danger because he felt himself secure.

The election was over ; the honourable member for Ramsay duly chaired. Dinners had been eaten, healths drunk, speeches made, the free and independent voters were left to talk over the events of the war, and the ancient borough-town returned to its pristine state of dulness. Mr. Egerton remained for more than a month at his own place—Helmsley, —superintending and arranging, forming plans for his tenants, looking over his farms ; till within a week of Christmas. Then he departed, for Christmas was to be spent at Ivors.

There was a good deal of pleasure in the prospect. Helmsley, indeed, was a much finer place than Ivors, but there was no companionship in the magnificent painted walls and broad staircases, —the suites of splendid rooms, — the rare pictures, — the gorgeous but old-fashioned furniture. He might fill his house with his gentlemen-friends ; but Claude Egerton could not live only with men. They had no power to draw him out of himself. They could only touch the surface of his heart ; and underneath there lay a deep, deep well of passionate feeling, which had never yet been fully sounded, but which at times, when stirred by the power of music or of poetry, he had striven to fathom, and started back alarmed at the capacity of happiness or of misery which it revealed to him. Man's society and man's affection would never reach the sources of that well ; and Claude, even when he mingled with men, and shared their pursuits, and threw himself with all the ardour of his character into the work which he shared in common with them, never found his happiness amongst them. Early recollections of domestic life haunted him. He longed for the ties of home, such as in his childish memories they appeared to him ; and, whilst dreading to risk their real loss by a rash step, he yet found comfort in any thing which gave him the semblance of the life for which he yearned. So, although still distrusting Lady Augusta, he was happy at Ivors, because she was to him kind and soothing ; and caring, as he supposed, nothing for Helen, he felt pleasure in her society, because she was graceful and winning in manners, pleasant in conversation, and feminine in taste. She assisted to fill up the space which was one day to be occupied by the perfection of his ideal. For Claude had his ideal, as most persons have. The recollection of his mother was its basis ; but it was built up after his own fancy, —not quite a

compound of superhuman virtues and faultless beauty, but something very nearly approaching to it, — something which, if it must have failings, would at least not have those likely to clash with his own peculiarities, and which certainly should not have been formed under the training of any person whom the Admiral could designate as hollow-hearted.

Strange it is how weak we all are in the point on which we think, and perhaps truly, that we are strong! One of the great objects of Claude Egerton's self-discipline was to keep himself free from prejudice; and yet that one observation made by his guardian had lingered by him, and influenced his judgment, and distorted his perception, until perhaps he was the very last person competent to give a fair opinion of Helen's character.

Yet she interested him; — he allowed that to himself, — and felt all the more secure because he could do so. She was continually unfolding some new phase of mind, and thus stimulating his curiosity. He could not make her out. She was paradoxical, — uncertain. There seemed really, at times, a great deal of good in her, but then it was so little to be depended on. He thought much about her, in that calm, speculative way in which he had accustomed himself to think of most women, even whilst the preparations for his election-business were engrossing his time: and now, when it was all over, and he was preparing for rest and recreation, he thought still more. But the meditations were considered perfectly safe. Claude Egerton was not conceited about most things, but he undoubtedly had too good an opinion of himself to imagine that he could be attracted merely by beauty and an undisciplined mind.

And in that state of feeling he set off for Ivors, on a bleak, snowy morning in December; having a journey of some fifty miles before him, partly to be made by railway, partly by one of those remnants of bygone days, a stage-coach. Easy and comfortable enough it was to wrap himself in his plaid, and place himself in the corner of the railway carriage, his lips hermetically sealed against conversation, and ruminate upon the occurrences of the last few weeks; and if this alone had been his mode of locomotion, the fifty miles might have been a hundred, and he would have little cared. But the railway transit ended most unfortunately soon, and then came a long delay in the old-fashioned inn of an old-fashioned town; the room into which he was shown dulled with smoke, the fire decaying, — nothing to be heard but the roll of an occasional cart, crashing its way over the half-melted, dirty ice in the road; nothing to be seen but the straggling rays

of the December sun, making only more visible the streaks in the window pane, and the dust on the faded crimson drugget which covered the floor.

The coach would not start for an hour and a half. Claude ordered a mutton chop and some sherry,—wandered out into the town, lionised a grand old church, and mourned and moralised over the churchwarden glories of high pews and heavy galleries ; returned to the inn and ate his mutton chop, and drank as much of the sour sherry as he thought sufficient to satisfy the landlady's feelings ; paid his bill, looked again despairingly out of the window, and thought the hour and a half the longest he had ever known ; meditated upon a fly, and gave up the notion when the snow came down ; and at length, precisely as the clock struck three, had the satisfaction of seeing the lumbering vehicle round, though with difficulty, the angle of entrance into the inn yard, and draw up in front of the Black Eagle. The inside was empty ; that was no slight consolation under the circumstances. Claude took his seat, devoutly hoping that no other traveller, equally venturesome with himself, would be found ready to trust to the comforts of a three-horse coach, when the snow was already, in many places, some inches deep, and might probably be many more before night closed in. On rolled the wheels along the broad high road, with a slow, proud pace, such as became a vehicle whose ancestry dated from the far-famed fly coach which first started from London in the reign of Queen Anne, occupying three days on the road, and requiring its passengers to take their places over night, that they might be ready to set off at daybreak. Claude gazed drearily out of the window upon the broad white fields, the speckled hedges, and the trees standing out clearly pencilled against the leaden sky, and felt as though he were in a new and unreal world,—a world in which he could be a spectator only, never an actor ; and his mind, usually so active, sunk into torpor ; whilst, instead of carrying his thoughts on to the busy future, upon which he had now pledged himself to enter, he suffered it to rest in the mere perception of the ceaseless fall of the thick snow-flakes, giving him the pleasant sensation of life without effort, and movement without obstacle.

Many miles were traversed in this way : lonely cottages seemed to glide by ; still, silent villages, marked by grey church towers ; long ranges of downs ; here and there a gentleman's house in a park. Claude grew more awake : they were approaching Wingfield, and he looked out for Mrs. Graham's house ; but he could only guess where it would be, for it was too dark to see distinctly.

It was pleasant to him to have any object of local interest, and Mrs. Graham was a person peculiarly attractive to him ; much more so than her children ; she had so much more animation. He was leaning rather forward, gazing from the window, when a sudden stop in the progress of the coach threw him back upon his seat. It was not a coach accident, the horses were standing perfectly still ; but the coachman was calling in loud tones to some one in the road : " Here's a business ; tell us what's the matter ? " and the guard called also, and a man's leg protruded itself over the window, as the individual to whom it belonged bent himself over the rail of the coach to look at some dark object in the road. Claude pushed open the door, and asked for information, but could obtain no reply except a low moan. He jumped out, and the guard at the same moment let himself down from the top. " She's got a knock, sir, I'm afraid ; a good job it aint no worse." A young girl was lying on the ground ; Claude tried to raise her up ; she moved, but seemed in pain. " 'Twas a near job we had n't run over her," said the guard ; " she was right in the way. Get up, my good creature ; 'tis but a bruise after all ; " and he stretched out his hand to assist her, whilst Claude knelt on the ground and put his arm round the girl to support her. In endeavouring to avoid the coach, her foot had slipped, and her head falling against a stone, she was partially stunned. The coachman, impatient at delay, comforted himself by declaring his conviction that " she would soon do perfectly well ; if there were no bones broke she'd come quite to herself in another second or two ; if the gentleman liked it, they might try to get her inside, and take her on to Wingfield : " and Claude and the guard raised the girl in their arms, and placed her in the coach. Claude took off his plaid and made a pillow for her head ; and when he found that the motion of the coach gave her pain, made her rest her foot on the opposite seat. He had a woman's gentleness of manner towards any thing suffering and in distress ; and the girl, soothed by his consideration, recovered herself after a time sufficiently to talk to him. " Her name was Hope," she said, " Kate Hope. She had just come from staying with an aunt ; she was lame, and had been lame a long time ; that was the cause of her fall. She had been brought by a cart to within a mile and a half of Wingfield, and had set off to walk the rest of the distance. She was going that night to Mrs. Graham's ; she was to stay there for a week, because it was Christmas. Mrs. Graham and the young ladies had always been her friends ; " and she went on to describe their unceasing little acts of kindness,

carried on for years, in a simple way, full of gratitude, but as if she had never been made to feel the burden of obligation.

Claude liked to hear it ; it was just the sort of kindness which pleased him,—unpretending and untiring. He questioned the girl more closely, and found that her father was one of Sir Henry Clare's tenants, a labourer on his estate. "Lady Augusta," she said, "had been very good to her mother when she was ill with rheumatic fever, the housekeeper had sent some broth twice a week, and Miss Graham had several times given her half-a-crown from Miss Clare, but she had never spoken either to Lady Augusta or the young lady." There was nothing like complaint in her tone when she said this ; she evidently thought that Lady Augusta was moving in a sphere beyond her rank, and could not be expected to notice her. But she turned from her to talk of Mrs. Graham with an eagerness which proved how near the subject was to her heart.

"The young woman is to stop at Mrs. Graham's, isn't she sir ?" said the guard, coming to the window, as the coach drew up in front of the iron gates.

"Yes ; is this Mrs. Graham's ? Stay, I will get out and help her ;" and Claude made the guard move aside whilst he carefully assisted Kate. It was a matter of difficulty, for her lame leg gave her a good deal of pain. Claude could not allow her to walk up to the house by herself. He called to the coachman, "Take my luggage on to the Lodge at Ivors, and leave it there ; I shall walk ; now lean upon me :" and he made Kate rest upon his arm, hastily paid his fare, and the coach drove off. The poor girl was too bewildered by pain to know exactly how much she had to be thankful for, though she did try to murmur something about "giving trouble," and "very kind." Claude was almost afraid that she would faint before she reached the house ; but by slow and cautious steps he managed at length to bring her to the front door, when he delivered her into the care of the servant, and went himself to give an account of his errand to Mrs. Graham.

"My mistress and the young ladies are in the study, sir," said the servant, as she led Kate away to the kitchen. Mr. Egerton was no stranger to her ; if he had been, she would have felt then that Kate had the first claim upon her. Servants invariably take their tone from their masters and mistresses, and Mrs. Graham's Martha had been taught consideration for suffering by nine years of service. Claude passed through the little hall, lighted by a small lamp, and, turning to the right, knocked at the study door. A cheerful, though rather surprised, "Come in," an-

swered him. A more bright and peaceful home party could scarcely have been seen. The little room, with the blazing fire, the lamp, the crimson furniture, and the well-filled book shelves, was most cheering to the eye, after the white desolation of the snowy fields. Isabella was sitting on a low chair near her mother, reading aloud; Anna copying music; Susan and Mrs. Graham working. A few flowers, a present probably from the Ivors greenhouse, were on the table, looking peculiarly lovely, as flowers always do by lamplight; and one of Susan's drawings, a small copy of a child's head, from a foreign print, had been placed near them, to be admired, no doubt, by her mother and sisters.

Claude felt, what he had no time to ponder upon, the atmosphere of peace, simplicity, and reality, which always pervaded Mrs. Graham's house. His arrival, however, disturbed it. Mrs. Graham welcomed him cordially, but hurriedly; she felt there must be something amiss to bring him there.

His explanation was soon made; and even before it was ended, Susan was leaving the room to look after Kate's comfort.

"She can be put into the little blue room, Susan," said Mrs. Graham; "not Martha's, it will be cold. Tell them to light a fire there, and you can carry that small easy chair into the kitchen, for her to rest for a few minutes, till the room is ready. I will be with her directly. Thank you, Mr. Egerton," as Claude offered to take the chair himself, "Susan will carry it easily, it is very light;" and Susan, laughingly, insisted upon taking the burden upon herself, and went away.

"I didn't know whether I could do any thing else for you," said Claude; "whether, if it should prove a bad injury, the girl had better be taken to the infirmary; or, perhaps, I could give some message to a surgeon."

"Thank you, you are very kind; I don't think the infirmary will do. Poor child! she has come here to spend her Christmas. We could n't send her away, we shall manage very well with her; we are all rather accustomed to nursing; the surgeon, too, lives just across the street, so that if we want him we can send for him without difficulty. You have given yourself quite trouble enough already. How do you mean to go on to Ivors?"

"Walk, I think; it is little more than a couple of miles."

"In the snow? and so cold!"

"It is not snowing now; it was not, at least, when I came in, and I have had enough of carriages to-day. I shall be in time for dinner at Ivors. They never sit down till seven."

"It is past six," said Mrs. Graham; "if you are going, I must be uncivil enough to say that you had better set off."

"Yes;" but Claude lingered still; probably the warmth of the fire was his attraction.

Susan came back again. "Mamma, Martha and I have moved Kate into the dining-room, and put her upon the little sofa, till her room was ready. Cook's brother was in the kitchen, and it was n't quite comfortable for her. We made her take off her boot, and she has one of my slippers on. She seems better now, and Martha is going to get her some tea."

"A change from the high road and the snow!" said Claude.

"Poor Kate! I am so sorry for her!" continued Susan. "She has been looking forward so to this visit! But she says she does n't care for any thing now she is here. How vexed Miss Harvey will be about it too, mamma! She had quite set her heart upon seeing Kate to-morrow."

"It is unfortunate; but really, Mr. Egerton, you must go."

"You are going to Ivors, I suppose?" said Susan.

"Yes, to walk there. Have you any commands?"

"Only my love to Helen, and I will come over to see her the first day I can,—that is, if the house is not filled with grand visitors: if it is, she must come and see me."

"She will have to entertain her visitors," said Claude.

"That is Lady Augusta's business, and Helen always manages to have her time free. She has been so busy with her drawing lately, and done such beautiful things." Susan looked at Claude with a pleased expression of face, as though certain that she had said something very agreeable; but he did not appear to notice her remark.

"You will try and see the Admiral to-morrow, I dare say?" said Mrs. Graham. "He has been looking anxiously for you."

"I had thought of going to the Lodge first, but Sir Henry put so many reasons before me, I could n't very well say no to him."

"Sir Henry, I am sure, could not possibly do without you," observed Mrs. Graham.

"Nor Lady Augusta, nor any of them," exclaimed Susan. "Every thing has been put off till Mr. Egerton came."

"Has it? They are very good!" Claude spoke abstractedly, and took up his hat. "I shall come and inquire after your invalid to-morrow."

"Kate won't thank you for calling her an invalid," said Susan. "She thinks nothing of her lameness; and I don't really think the bruise is very much."

Claude did not insist then upon coming the next day. He turned away from Susan, and wished Mrs. Graham good night.

Just at that instant Martha came into the room, begging to

speak to Miss Graham; and Susan bade Claude a very hurried good-bye, with her head full of other things, and hastened away. Claude departed also.

"Mamma," said Susan, when she happened to be alone with her mother in the study, about half-an-hour afterwards, "I don't think Mr. Egerton was in such haste to be at Ivors as I should have expected."

"His mind was preoccupied," said Mrs. Graham. "He was thinking what he could do for Kate."

"Helen would n't approve of that cold way he puts on when he speaks of her," said Susan. "Mamma, I hope Lady Augusta is not wrong."

"She takes care not to be," said Mrs. Graham. "She has never told me any thing,—only implied it."

"But it would be very terrible for Helen, if he is cold," said Susan. "If she cares for him, that is—but I don't know,—I don't understand it."

"I dare say they will manage their little affairs very well, whether we understand them or not," said Mrs. Graham. "Probably they don't quite know their own minds yet."

"Perhaps not; but I think — Mamma, do women ever care for men who don't care for them?" Susan looked at her mother very earnestly.

"Sometimes; not often, we may hope."

"It would be so sad,—so lowering, humiliating:" and Susan shuddered.

"Sad, my child, not humiliating. There is nothing really humiliating but that which is sinful."

"Oh, mamma! yes—yes. To feel that one had thrown away one's affection,—that one had offered it even in thought, and been rejected! It would lie on my heart, and crush me." Susan clasped her hands together, and her eyes sparkled for a moment with eagerness, and then became dim with proud tears.

Her mother drew her towards her and kissed her. "There is a rest for that burden as there is for all others, my darling; but God grant you may never need it. Yet remember that the grief which received from man crushes us to earth, when received from God bears us to heaven."

"Poor Helen!" murmured Susan, brushing away a tear.

But Mrs. Graham smiled, and said, "There are many sadder prospects in the world than hers, though Claude Egerton may prefer the certainty of a warm fire within doors to the chance of a snow-storm without."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE Ivors party were assembled in the library : Sir Henry and Lady Augusta, Maurice and Helen. There was no one staying in the house ; invitations had all been left till the arrival of Claude Egerton.

"A clever pamphlet enough !" said Sir Henry, throwing down a Letter upon the Poor Laws : "why don't you read it, Maurice ?"

"Thank you, sir, I don't know that it would particularly interest me."

"It ought, though. If you ever mean to go into Parliament, you must get up the question."

"I shall think about it when the necessity comes, sir, I dare say. In the meantime ——"

"You prefer the police reports in the Times," said Helen, rising slowly from her seat, and looking over her brother's shoulder.

"Well enough, for want of something better. It does n't much matter what it is when one has been out shooting all day."

"How many brace did you kill ?" asked Lady Augusta.

"Only two. Hume and I had wretched sport. By the bye, sir, Moss tells me there are loads of poachers about ; he wants more help."

"Not my tenants, I trust," said Sir Henry.

"I did n't inquire. I think, though, that I heard some one say they belong chiefly to the hamlet at Crayke, where those broken-down cottages are."

Lady Augusta joined in the conversation, putting aside what looked like a printed report of some society. "Crayke is really a disgraceful place, from all they say of it. I really think, Sir Henry, you might just as well part with that corner of the property. It is a great deal too near Wingfield to be any good to us."

"It might be improved, I suppose," said Sir Henry.

"Small hope of that, sir," replied Maurice, "if the stories Moss tells are true."

"It wants draining," said Sir Henry, thoughtfully. "The marsh makes the place unhealthy."

"And it would cost hundreds to drain it properly," said Lady Augusta. "I was looking the other day at some agricultural report, I forget what,—I had it here ;" and she began searching amongst some papers on a side table.

"No occasion to look, my dear," observed Sir Henry, shortly ; "I know as well as you do that draining is an expensive process."

"And till it is drained, of course nothing can be done with it," said Lady Augusta; "and you will only get a wretched set of people to live there, bringing every kind of vice into the neighbourhood. Helen, remember, I won't have you go by that Crayke lane."

"I never do, mamma; the people are far too disagreeable."

"And now I think of it," said Lady Augusta, "I doubt whether some rule ought not to be made about the school. If we give our fête to the children, we can't possibly have the Crayke children with the others."

"I don't see the necessity of omitting them, my dear," said Sir Henry, "if there is no illness amongst them."

"Oh! but there may be; one never can answer for it. I shall give orders to Mr. Brownrigg to have them kept away. I don't want to disappoint them," she added, seeing Helen's impatient look of disapprobation; "they shall have their tea and cake at home; but I really must insist upon it, they don't come to the house."

"They are a dirty little set, as one would wish to see," said Maurice; "they quite swarm round one, when one rides through the place."

"Of course, most objectionable! So near Wingfield, too. It really is very sad to see the state of the people in this neighbourhood. I don't believe, myself, any thing will be done, till we have sisterhoods to work amongst the poor: there is no other way of reaching them."

"Draining," said Sir Henry, quietly.

"You are laughing at me. Gentlemen always do laugh at these suggestions, of which, begging their pardon, they know nothing. The moral influence of sisterhoods has been proved to be enormous; and why set them down as Romish? Look on the continent,—at Germany,—see what is done there. It is simply a prejudice which is at work against them."

"I never said it was not my dear," said Sir Henry, taking out his pocket-book, and making a memorandum, headed by the words, "Crayke, and draining."

"Most interesting, this is," said Lady Augusta, again referring to her report. "Helen, love, you must read it."

"By and by, mamma. When I have nothing else to do," she added, in an under tone, to Maurice.

"There is a great deal of good done in Wingfield, in one way and another, I believe," observed Sir Henry. "Berry works indefatigably, so does his wife."

"It is a pity they have so neglected their children," observed Lady Augusta, shortly. "Grace Berry is really the most *gauche* creature; I felt the other day as if I could not possibly ask her here again. And her brother may be a very good young man; but he is so shy one can get nothing out of him."

"Grace is a good, honest girl," said Sir Henry.

"So you would say of your housemaid; but what can one expect from those Wingfield people?"

"Frances Graham gets on wonderfully well with them," said Sir Henry.

"*Chacun à son goût.* The very way they dress is enough to disgust one. Flowers, lace, satins, and the perpetual 'my lady,' and 'your ladyship.' It really is too intolerable. I give Mrs. Graham wonderful credit for enduring it."

"But they are not all of that stamp," observed Sir Henry. "Mrs. Graham's friends are really superior people. She manages to show civil attentions to the others, but she quite knows how to keep them at a proper distance."

"My dear Sir Henry,"—and Lady Augusta spoke emphatically,—"I see what you are aiming at,—politics! those dreadful politics! But remember I can't give in. If once we break through our rule, and keep open house, we shall have all the mob of the country to entertain. I have acted upon principle—one sacred principle—all through my married life. I have most religiously kept our dear child from whatever might have a lowering effect upon her taste and feelings; and I cannot, I assure you I cannot, be prevailed upon to swerve from that principle now. Just when she is entering life, when her perceptions are most acute, most sensitive, I must surround her with every thing that is high and ennobling. Indeed, Sir Henry, you make me very anxious when you propose such things;" and Lady Augusta drew out her embroidered handkerchief to wipe away her anxiety, and Sir Henry took refuge from his—in the Poor Laws.

Helen sat, as she had been sitting for the last quarter of an hour, leaning her elbow upon the arm of her chair, resting her forehead on her hand, and thinking—what were her thoughts?

"Mr. Egerton, my lady, in the hall. He begs you will not wait dinner for him. He has walked from Wingfield."

Helen started up, so did Lady Augusta. Sir Henry was in the hall before the servant had time to return to Claude; Lady Augusta followed.

"Walked from Wingfield? my good fellow, what did you do *that* for? But you are come at last, and good luck to ye, as

the Irish say," and Sir Henry shook Claude cordially by both hands.

"We were becoming quite anxious about you dear Claude," murmured Lady Augusta, laying her soft fingers, with their brilliant rings, upon Claude's rough winter-coat. "You know your way to your room—your own room—unoccupied since you left us. Don't hurry, don't distress yourself; we are only ourselves—a family party. But just let Helen and Maurice have the pleasure of shaking hands with you before you go upstairs."

Maurice was still sitting comfortably by the fire. He was not much in the habit of disturbing himself for any one, much less for an old friend like Claude Egerton, with whom he felt quite at home. But Helen was already at the drawing-room door, ready to welcome Claude with one of her sweetest smiles, and a cordial "I am so glad to see you!" which went to his heart much more than Lady Augusta's anxiety. Yes, it was pleasant to find one house in which every one brightened at his approach.

"Now we won't keep you," said Lady Augusta. "Dinner will be ready in ten minutes, and you shall tell us your adventures presently."

"Political adventures too!" exclaimed Sir Henry. "Lady Augusta and Helen have n't heard half from me what you can tell them yourself. Curious discoveries in human nature to be made in a contested election, eh, Claude?"

And Claude smiled an assent, but did not promise to relate his discoveries, perhaps shrinking from the recollection of the scenes of which he had been unavoidably a witness.

He made his appearance again in a quarter of an hour, as short a time as could have been expected, considering the condition in which he had arrived.

Dinner was ordered immediately; a comfortable little dinner in what was called the study, a much more sociable apartment than the large, handsome, but dreary dining-room.

"This is very home-like," was Claude's observation, as he seated himself next to Helen at the round table.

"Glad to hear you say so, my dear fellow," observed Sir Henry, giving him his hand. "There is no one I wish to feel more at home at Ivors than yourself."

And Helen turned to Claude, and added, "We shall not enjoy such comfortable little dinners next week, when all the gaieties commence."

"But we must hear your adventures," began Lady Augusta.

"Let him eat his soup, my dear;—and some wine. Dale, give

Mr. Egerton the wine. Two miles' walk on a December evening, with snow some inches deep on the ground——"

"Is nothing to boast of, or to think of," said Claude lightly. "Helen, I have a message for you from your cousin Miss Graham."

"Oh! you stopped at Wingfield," said Lady Augusta. There was a great effort to show that she thought it quite natural that he should do so, but it failed. Claude perceived the change in her tone, and looked up in surprise. Helen, too, glanced at Lady Augusta, and went on eating her soup in silence.

"Yes, I stopped at Wingfield," continued Claude, "to give Mrs. Graham the charge of a poor girl who had been knocked down, or rather who had fallen in trying to escape being knocked down by the coach."

Lady Augusta was relieved. "Oh! very kind of you! extremely considerate! but that, my dear Claude, you always were."

"I don't know that," replied Claude, bluntly. "Mrs. Graham is the considerate person—and her daughter, Susan;—I must call her Susan to you," he added, laughing, and addressing Helen. "Don't tell her I take such a liberty; I am decidedly Mr. Egerton to her, as she once told me."

"Susan is very proper," said Lady Augusta, the words seeming to make their way with difficulty through her half-closed lips.

"Susan is wonderfully good," said Helen. "The way in which she adopts all the old women and dirty children in Wingfield is a perfect example. I declare sometimes, when I am with her, I begin to think that every one who is not collecting rags or teaching the alphabet is leading a useless life."

"There are different occupations according to different positions in life," said Lady Augusta, oracularly. "Susan Graham's circle is not that which would suit you, Helen."

"Not at all, mamma; I never dreamt for one moment that it would. She has been reading sermons every day for the last ten years to a blind old lady, who is growing, besides, so deaf, that I wonder Susan has n't cracked her voice long before this, in attempting to make her hear."

"It is the fashion," observed Maurice; "all young ladies take to that kind of thing now. They run after sermons and services as they do after the opera."

"That scarcely applies to Miss Graham," said Claude.

"Not in the least," observed Sir Henry. "Susan Graham has n't a particle of cant about her. A nice, good-humoured girl, who dresses well, talks well ——"

"Nay, my dear Sir Henry, excuse me, that is just what Susan Graham does not do; she is very estimable but decidedly dull. Claude, may I trouble you to cut up that chicken?" and Lady Augusta became suddenly interested in the appetites of the party, and particularly anxious that Helen should make up for some deficiency in that respect, which she professed to have remarked lately. But the conversation would come round again to the unwelcome topic, or to something approaching it, in spite of Lady Augusta's efforts. Sir Henry, slow of comprehension in matters of feeling, and very trying to his wife in consequence, insisted upon knowing the particulars of Kate Hope's accident, and what had been done for her. "He knew the Hopes," he said, "they were Crayke people. He had never heard any thing about a lame daughter; he supposed the housekeeper could tell every thing about her, she had lists of the poor people."

"You know her," said Claude, addressing Helen; "she told me you had often sent her half-a-crown by your cousin."

"Possibly! I don't remember. Does she want any more now?" asked Helen, with interest.

Claude smiled. "I dare say she does, but I am not quite the person to say. You could hear from your cousin easily. The girl is going to stay there."

"Stay at Mrs. Graham's? A girl from Crayke?" inquired Lady Augusta in a tone of alarm.

"To spend her Christmas, I believe," said Claude.

"A most singular fancy," observed Lady Augusta. "I don't know any one more peculiar than Mrs. Graham."

"Is the Crayke young lady to take up her abode in the drawing-room, and do worsted-work?" inquired Helen.

"Not quite, I imagine; but I really asked no questions. It seemed to me that there was a good deal of kind thought bestowed upon her."

"And a good deal of unwise action," continued Lady Augusta, solemnly. "Unquestionably, Mrs. Graham risks a great deal by the way she brings up her girls. What did you tell me, Helen, the other day, of the curious parties she has in the winter?"

"Children's parties," said Helen, "with games, and a Christmas-tree, and that sort of thing; to which she asks the very oddest people; persons one never heard of,—aborigines, Hottentots. Susan owned to me that it was a considerable tax; but aunt Fanny has such an idea of duties to society, and what she calls opening the door for kindness."

"And you don't agree with her?" said Claude.

"I don't know. I don't disagree; that is, I never thought about it; only one always fancies that society is a question of taste. And, really, I don't see why one is to put oneself out of the way for vulgar people."

"Principle, not taste, my dear Helen," observed Lady Augusta. "Vulgarity arises from some defect in the mind. That is my objection to it. You must agree with me, Claude?"

"I suppose I must," said Claude, thoughtfully, "only,—I don't know whether I do the world injustice,—but it strikes me sometimes, that with two-thirds of the people whom one meets, it is merely a question of the disease external, or internal."

"I think that too," said Helen, gently.

"Do you?" Claude looked pleased. "I am glad we are beginning with agreement."

"I am in a good humour to-day," replied Helen. "Besides, as a rule, I can't bear my fellow-creatures; so it is a comfort to find fault with them."

Claude laughed, looking at the same time as if he thought he ought to be grave, and Helen, to try him a little more, began a ludicrous account of some absurd people of pretension, whom she had met with in a railway-carriage.

When she was not personal, he could enjoy her descriptions as much as any one. His spirits rose, partly from the mere fact of being amused, partly also from the home feeling, to which he was peculiarly susceptible after his loneliness. There was something also in Helen's ease which put him at ease: he repeated anecdotes of his own experience, in pretension and vulgarity; and being led on by Sir Henry, was persuaded at last to give some of his best election stories, which Helen enjoyed from their novelty. The dinner was altogether a very merry one. Claude liked the unusual phase of himself, which contact with Helen exhibited. It was a pleasant feeling, which he never had in the society of men. He sat by her the greater part of the evening, made her sing some of his favourite songs, promised to teach her chess by way of occupation, if they were snowed up; and being made entirely one of the family, agreed to meet at a council the next morning, to decide the programme of proceedings for the Christmas festivities.

But approve of her? Certainly he did not. Trust her? How could he? with the Admiral's warning ringing in his ear. Marry her? The thought did not even cross his mind. He went to sleep that night thinking of his ideal of a woman, and dreamed of Helen.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE snow continued for some days, and very heavily; the roads were pronounced impassable. Claude, however, made one great effort, and walked over to the Lodge, where he found the Admiral gouty, and, as a consequence, cross; angry with him for having gone to Ivors first, which was a plan he had before quite acquiesced in; angry with Mrs. Graham because she did not come to see him, though he had himself sent her a message to beg she would not venture in the snow: angry more than all with himself for being angry.

"There, you must forgive me, my boy," he said, giving his hand to Claude, after the grumbling spirit had a little exhausted itself. "You'll have the twinge yourself, some day, then you'll understand."

"I think I can understand now, sir, without it; at any rate, I shall try, that I may not require such a sharp lesson to teach me. My father had the gout, you know."

"Ah! yes, poor fellow! I remember. But it is apt to pass over one generation, so there's a hope for you. Oh dear! move the stool; a little nearer; gently, now, gently. Where's that fellow Barnes gone?"

"He left us to talk, sir, I suppose."

"Fool!—I beg your pardon, Claude. Ring the bell, and tell him I want him."

Barnes was only in the next room, and returned immediately. "Barnes give me my letters; not those, what are you thinking of? Oh dear! don't mind me, Claude. There, give me the letters,—now go," and Barnes retired in perfect good-humour.

"A man's a saint, Claude, that keeps his temper with the gout. Just open the letters; there's one I want to show you. It's about Frances Graham's business. You know I am trustee for her and the children. You'll tell it by the hand: a capital, clear, round hand; it's little Susan's copying."

Claude found the letter, read it, and discussed it; a note from Susan was read also, giving her mother's opinion upon the point in question, which had something to do with the sale of some property.

"Frances Graham has n't been to see me for a week," observed the Admiral, "else there would n't have been the need for writing; but she knows how to make her girl useful. A lawyer could n't have written a better letter than that."

"Not so good, probably," observed Claude. "He certainly would have used more words."

"Short, and to the purpose. It's the way with all the child does," observed the Admiral, looking Claude full in the face. "Deeds, not words. It's a motto you like, Claude, eh?"

Claude gave an assent, not hearty enough to please the Admiral, who changed the subject suddenly and became political, and Claude was soon deep in the history of his election; the Admiral cross-questioning him in a tone which might have suited a barrister who feels his strong point about to be undermined. But even politics, though generally an engrossing topic, did not long please. A ring at the bell, which proved, however, only to be a message, brought the Admiral back again to more personal matters. He thought it might have been Mrs. Graham, and would not be satisfied by hearing from Claude that the roads were in such a state, it would be out of the question for a lady to attempt the walk.

"Not walk? why not? She'll go about enough in Wingfield, I'll answer for it. If she could n't come, the girls might. I thought better of Susan; but they are all alike. I suppose your fine ladies at Ivors don't put their noses out of doors?"

"I beg your pardon, sir; Helen and I walked for some time in the colonnade this morning."

The old man half turned himself round in his chair, and a frown contracted his forehead. "*Helen* and you! How long has that been, I should like to know?" His eye was almost fierce in its expression.

Claude felt his colour rise, very absurdly, as he was aware, but that consciousness did not tend to decrease his uncomfortable feeling. He answered lightly: "We have always called each other by our Christian names, sir. You know we are cousins; at least, so Lady Augusta will have it. It is easier to say Helen than Miss Clare. You are not alarmed for me, are you?" and he laughed rather awkwardly.

"Did you ever see a spider spread a net for a fly?" asked the Admiral, sharply.

Claude looked annoyed. "My dear sir, you must forgive me; I really can't talk of such nonsense seriously. Helen Clare is pretty and amusing enough, but not at all the kind of person I should choose for my wife, which I suppose is what you mean, even if I were thinking of marrying, which I really am not."

"Well!—so far, well!" said the Admiral, his face relaxing; "but that old woman at Ivors would be a match for a hundred such youngsters as you, my boy. Cousins, indeed! have n't I seen

hundreds tied together for life, like or not like, merely because they began by being cousins. Trust me, Claude, keep yourself out of the snare. The girl's well-looking enough, though, for myself, I'd rather have one glance of my little Susan's honest eye, than twenty thousand of such fly-away looks as hers; but she's not made for you. A fashionable, flimsy creature, that would slip through your fingers, and leave you without a grain of comfort! Be on your guard, I say."

"Thank you, sir, for the warning. When I begin to think of Helen Clare for a wife, I will remember it."

"Trust Lady Augusta for giving you time for that. Why, my good fellow, if she has set her heart upon it, she'll have you in for it, licence, ring, cake, and favours, all ready, and you fastened up before you can turn round and ask whether your hand is your own."

"You do me too much honour, sir, by imagining that Lady Augusta has any such designs. When she has all London to choose from, she will scarcely take the trouble to plan so much to entrap a humble individual like myself."

"Humble! with twelve thousand a-year; you are too great a fool, Claude!"

"There are men with twenty thousand and a title to be had for the seeking," said Claude, laughing.

"Maybe! But you don't know the woman as I do. She's a schemer on principle. That's a worse kind of schemer than any other. She'll have you, Claude, not merely because you have twelve thousand a-year, but because she sets you down as a man to stand high in the eyes of the world. Lady Augusta Clare care for money or rank! Oh, no!" and the Admiral burst into an irritable laugh. "Talent,—reputation,—goodness,—goodness," he repeated the word, ironically; "Those are the prizes. If they all ride together in a coach-and-six, well and good! and if they don't, ten chances to one that they never reach my lady's door; but the coach-and-six are not to be put to weigh in the balance, oh, no!"

Claude laughed again, and this time more freely. "If I am taken in, sir, as you would call it, it would certainly not be for want of warning; but I think, if you saw Helen and myself together, you would agree with me that no two people could be more safe."

"Safe! my good fellow; there's no one safe. Just look round the world, and see where's the clever man that has got a sensible wife,—not one in a hundred. The more wisdom a man has in his head, the more folly he is likely to have in his heart."

"Thank you, sir; but I don't pique myself upon my wisdom, so I feel that the observation does n't apply to me; and for Helen, you would scarcely call a man a fool for marrying her."

"I would though. What does a man want in a wife? Not a whirligig thing, that changes with every change of the wind, and knows no medium between crying and laughing; but a steady, good-humoured, rational companion, ready with a smile at any moment, able to help him through his difficulties, putting number one always in the background. No pupil of Lady Augusta Clare ever did that, Claude."

"I see no reason why she should n't be taught to do it," replied Claude. "Besides, I really think you do Helen injustice, sir. She certainly is not selfish."

"What do you call selfishness, then? Look at Susan Graham, working for others from morning till night; taking all the trouble from her mother in housekeeping; looking after the poor and the schools; writing a capital hand — yes, a capital hand," and the Admiral took up Susan's letter again: "she's a girl worth something. But for the other! a fine lady, with her flounces and furbelows, why she's fit for nothing but to work shepherdesses in that worsted-work they are always at."

Claude looked grave. The Admiral added, pettishly, "Why don't you speak, man? What are you thinking of?"

"Nothing that would please you, I am afraid, sir."

"Have it out, — have it out. What's the mischief? Is the girl Mrs. Egerton already?" and the Admiral made a sudden move which obliged him almost to scream with pain.

Claude arranged the gouty cushions, and answered slowly as he did so: "Helen would not thank you for the suggestion, sir. She has no wish to be Mrs. Egerton; but if she were my wife, or the wife of any man whom she loved, she has powers of self-devotion which would make her give up every thing for her husband's happiness."

"Self-devotion! Fiddlesticks! How is a woman to learn self-devotion after marriage, when she has done nothing but learn self-love before it?"

"We differ a little there, my dear sir. I grant you that Lady Augusta's training would have taught selfishness, if any training could; but Helen is wonderfully unspoilt, and has a very noble nature."

"Well! so have other people; so has my little Susan," said the Admiral.

"Miss Graham does seem a very amiable person," was Claude's *cold reply*.

It was too much for the Admiral's patience. He threw himself back in his chair, muttering to himself, "He's gone, — the boy's gone. Amiable, indeed! amiable! I had rather hear him say, she's a vixen."

Claude, sorry to have annoyed him, took up the defensive tone. "My dear sir, you really misunderstand me. Of course, I don't mean to institute any comparison between Helen and Miss Graham, or Miss Anybody."

"Anybody! my good fellow; hold your tongue, if you don't mean to drive me frantic."

And Claude was for a moment silent, and then continued again. "I assure you, my dear sir, I have the greatest respect for Miss Graham; if it were only as being Mrs. Graham's daughter. You know Mrs. Graham is one of my oldest and best friends; I could not but feel great respect."

"Ring the bell, Claude." The Admiral's lips were firmly shut, and he only opened them again to order Barnes to bring luncheon.

Claude, innocent and ignorant of his offence, tried in vain to bring him back to good humour. He ate his luncheon in silence, refused even to let Claude pour out his glass of wine, and was, in fact, thoroughly put out.

Claude knew him sufficiently well to understand how to manage him. He took no notice, but went on for some time talking upon indifferent subjects; and, when he found he could obtain no reply, had recourse to a book. When the Admiral prepared for his afternoon's nap, Claude prepared for his departure.

"I shall come and see you again, sir, the very first day I can, and bring you the sketch Sir Henry and I have drawn out upon the Poor-Law Question: I should like to have your opinion of it."

No answer.

Claude looked about for his gloves, and went towards the door. The Admiral thought he was going.

"Claude, I say, Claude!" The voice was weak and gruff, but unquestionably relenting. Claude turned back directly.

"Do you want anything, dear sir? your pillows moved?"

The Admiral caught his hand. His eyes, dim with age, were still more shadowed with tears. "I'm a fool, Claude, — forgive me: but the child is like my own; so are you. There, go, and God bless you! and don't be taken in by Lady Augusta."

Poor old man! He had marred his own object by those last words. They sent Claude away, — again thinking upon Helen, and precisely in the way most likely to interest him in her. All noble dispositions are inclined to take part with the accused; and

Claude was singularly generous, — anxious to support the injured, willing to confess himself in the wrong. The Admiral had infused into his mind a suspicion of Helen's sincerity, before he could be said to know her; and for a while it had worked to her prejudice. It might have continued there still, but for this interview, in which prejudice had been so clearly shown that he was at once put upon his guard. In defending her, he had brought out his own secret opinions, and had said things which he had never yet allowed to himself. He had called her wonderfully unspoilt, — capable of self-devotion: never till that day had he realised the fact; but it was a truth, and he dwelt upon it pleasantly, with a feeling of rest. Ivors was more charming to him than it had been before; the thought of Helen was a greater attraction. He went over, in his own mind, all that the Admiral had said of her and of Susan, with the secret feeling that the prejudice which worked so strongly against the one might be equally misleading in favour of the other, — allowing Helen's faults, but excusing them, — allowing Susan's virtues, but distrusting them. Meddling with such matters is, indeed, playing with edged tools. Claude Egerton had advanced many degrees nearer what the Admiral would have thought the edge of the precipice, by the time he reached Ivors.

CHAPTER XV.

CHRISTMAS-DAY fell upon a Tuesday. Public festivities were to begin on the Wednesday following, in the form of a grand school fête, with a Christmas-tree and magic-lantern, to be given in the hall at Ivors to the children of the Ivors school, — not a National school, but one especially under Lady Augusta Clare's superintendence. The school treat was Lady Augusta's pet plan for giving, as she said, a tone of right feeling to the whole. It would show that the rich could sympathise with the poor, and treat them with consideration. She felt it was setting a good example in the neighbourhood; and this they were, of course, bound to consider. Her eloquence showed itself not only in speaking, but in writing. She despatched three sheets of note-paper upon the subject by way of an invitation to her cousin, Lady Louisa Stuart, and sent similar, though shorter, documents to her aunt, Mrs. Grey, and her intimate friend, Miss Manners, in all which she took care to

insist upon the principle on which such entertainments were to be conducted ;—the sacrifice made by the rich,—the gratitude necessarily felt by the poor. Very well written notes they were,—the sentences well rounded, the words well chosen,—the only objection to them being that, like most of Lady Augusta's productions, they were so full of many meanings as to end in having none.

"Mamma takes the school children under her care," said Helen to Claude, as they stood talking together by the fire, after a long breakfast on the Saturday before Christmas-day. "I propose that we take the grown up children under ours. Do you know whom we are to have?"

"Humes, Mordaunts, Grahams," he stopped.

"Grahams, not to be put in with the rest of the world," said Helen, "I like my cousins a great deal too well for that."

He began again, "Humes, Mordaunts."

Helen interrupted him, "Please be merciful ; they are the only names I have heard for the last six months, and I am heartily weary of them."

"The only names I have heard either," replied Claude, "unless I go back to the Dobsons, Smiths, and Browns, of Ramsay."

"Then you have not seen mamma's list. I may as well show it you, if we are to take counsel about it." Helen produced a paper from her pocket-book. "Now then, for materials. Lady Louisa Stuart, a hundredth cousin, elderly, blue, six feet high ; writes in magazines, quotes Shakespeare till one is inclined to wish he had never lived, and will do very well for Lady Macbeth, if we get up a tableau."

"Mrs. Grey ! a good, dear old lady of seventy, who likes every body, and thinks mamma an oracle. Miss Manners, my abomination ! Don't tell mamma that ; she is her very dear friend. A mixture of science and Germanism, drowned in ologies, and devoted to Kant. A woman who talks desperately of Being and Existence, and makes you heartily wish you could forget her own. Mr. Drayson ! a good man I believe ; at least, I never heard any harm of him except that every body runs after him. I don't see what business he has to leave his parish just now : but he knows best. He won't do for a charade or a tableau, so we may put him aside."

"I don't see any thing very hopeful for charades if these are all we are to have," said Claude.

"You are so impatient. There is one of Maurice's friends, a Mr. Pearson, a barrister ; and mamma's cousin, Captain Mordaunt, more stocked with good nature than with brains, but who will do

very well for a door-post; and there will be Miss Hume, and Mary, and my three cousins; and, oh! I forgot, Jane Aubrey, Lord Steyne's daughter, and perhaps Lord Steyne himself. Jane is a very good-natured girl, very clever,—pretty too. I have seen her make an admirable Rebecca."

"And they all come on Wednesday to the school treat, do they?" inquired Claude.

"Nearly all, I believe. You know when we do a good deed, it is as well to let the world know it;" said Helen, looking at him archly.

"You are sarcastic," replied Claude.

"Am I? I only say what I think. Mr. Berry and Aunt Fanny give a school treat in Wingfield every year, but the world are not asked to it, and so they get no praise for it."

"It is the clergyman's duty," said Claude, in a dry tone.

"Some one else can be sarcastic besides me," observed Helen. "After all, it is a comfortable thing to be in a position in which one has no duties, or next to none; a very little goes such a great way then."

A sigh followed the remark, and Helen sat down in the arm-chair by the fire, and began to study a newspaper.

"If you would learn to say what you really mean, you would help both yourself and others, Helen," observed Claude, thoughtfully.

"Words are nothing. What does it signify whether they have a meaning or not?"

"Words form our characters as much as actions do," said Claude.

"Characters form words, you mean."

"No; begging your pardon. I always say what I mean."

"I shall turn you over to discuss Being with Miss Manners," said Helen, pettishly; "I don't understand metaphysics."

Claude smiled faintly. "I shan't thank you for that, by your own account. But we won't talk metaphysics if you dislike it."

"I don't dislike it; at least not more than I dislike every thing and every body."

Claude was silent.

Helen pretended to read, but she looked up after a few moments, and said simply, and in a tone of earnestness, "Have I offended you?"

He started, and his eye flashed eagerly; then became again cold and severe, as he answered, "I have no right to be offended with you, and there is nothing to be offended at."

"But vexed, have I vexed you? I should be very sorry."

The tone, so musically gentle, and the bright, candid glance of

Helen's eye, would have touched a far colder temperament than Claude's. But he kept a strict guard over himself, and answered with apparent indifference: "You vex me for yourself, for nothing else."

"I have said something naughty," said Helen, folding her hands like a penitent child. "Please forgive; I don't know at all what it was."

Claude laughed, and answered, "I ought by this time to be accustomed to hear that you dislike everybody. I have been told so often enough."

"*Façon de parler*," said Helen. "I would not on any account commit murder."

"But,"—he paused, and turned away; "it is no good; I only bore you."

"If you were but a clergyman, you might preach," said Helen, provokingly.

"Yes, and not being one I must hold my tongue."

"Now I think of it, I should like to be a clergyman of all things," exclaimed Helen. "I should so delight to be able to get up in a pulpit, and tell everybody what I thought of them. Naughty again, isn't it?" she added, with another of those winning glances, for which Claude, in spite of himself, watched as for the flash of the summer lightning.

"I doubt which would be the most annoyed when your sermon was ended," he said, "yourself or your hearers."

"Myself annoyed, because I spoke the truth?"

"It would not be truth, any more than it is true to say that you dislike everybody."

"I am the best judge of my own words; and at any rate I don't ask for an opinion upon them," said Helen, petulantly.

Claude smiled. "This is too silly in us, Helen; we always contrive to end in this way. I don't know why."

"But I do," replied Helen. "Because you are always cavilling at my words,—preaching to me."

"Well! I am, I am; I confess it. I am very tiresome, very troublesome. I am not so, at least I hope not, to any one else. But, Helen, you do yourself injustice,—and I ought not to care,—but I do."

His face became crimson, then pale, and muttering something about letters to write, without another word he left the room.

Claude paced the colonnade in a tumult of agitation, angry with himself, ashamed, frightened. What had he said, done, felt? Did Helen understand? Would she put any interpretation on his

words? was there really any interpretation to be put? He did not know why he had spoken in that way,—he had no intention of doing so a moment before. Yet he was the last man in England,—so at least he considered himself, to be led away by a hasty feeling. What he had said was, however, really nothing. He had declared himself vexed that Helen should do herself injustice; perfectly true, and very natural. Why that strange, confusing, consciousness of indiscretion should have crossed him he could not tell; but it was there, he was unable to escape from it. He tried to forget it, but it would not go. Care! yes, he did care for Helen; her growth in goodness, her consistency, and rightmindedness, as he might and ought to care for any one who had been the friend and playmate of his boyhood, but she was nothing to him. He had his dream, his ideal to rest upon; and Helen, wayward, petulant, proud, severe with others, indulgent to herself, was as far removed from the gentle, humble, self-denying, sympathising being of his imagination, as if she had been the creature of another world. Yet he thought of her; her face haunted him; her voice rang in his ears; she was before him wherever he turned, with her graceful movements, her bewitching smile. The very moment after he had said she was nothing to him, he was dwelling upon every word she had uttered, thinking what she meant, what she felt; conjecturing what there might be beneath the thick veil of self-delusion and inconsistency; longing to reach her true mind, to direct and guide her, to lead her to high and noble objects. Thought travelled on; he grew calmer, his pace slackened. He pictured Helen not as she was, but as she might be; lovely, winning, candid, generous, affectionate still; but self-controlled, earnestly religious, her life given to her fellow-creatures, her heart to God. It was a hope of Heaven rather than of earth which followed; it made his heart beat rapidly, his blood rush wildly through his veins.

For the first time Helen Clare's reality, and Claude Egerton's ideal, had in imagination met and become one.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE weather changed suddenly on Christmas Eve; a thaw came, with a bright sun, the snow melted rapidly, and the roads were even more impassable than before, for those who disliked mud.

But the Admiral was happy. The gout was gradually leaving him ; and Mrs. Graham, less afraid of a dirty road than of the bitter wind, which might have been injurious to Isabella, whose constitution was delicate, had offered to pass Christmas Day with him. They were to be at the Lodge the evening before, all but Charlie, who had been carried off, much against his sister's will, to spend a little time with a schoolfellow, and was not expected at Wingfield for some days.

The old man dwelt upon the thought of having so many about him with a child's pleasure ; settled himself with the housekeeper which rooms were to be occupied, and gave particular directions, even to the minutiae of lighting fires. Loneliness, though he had been accustomed to it for years, had in no way rendered him misanthropical, and there were associations clinging to Mrs. Graham and her children, which at times put forth young fresh shoots of life and feeling, as the green leaves spring unexpectedly from the fallen trunk, about to be carried away as dead.

Yet there was a lurking uneasiness in his mind upon one point. He would not face it or acknowledge it ; but Barnes observed that afternoon, that whenever the Admiral mentioned Mr. Egerton's name, it was with an expression of complaint, as if some passing annoyance had for the time come between them. Claude had been over to the Lodge again, but he had arrived at an unfortunate moment, when the Admiral was suffering a good deal, and could not talk to him ; nothing, therefore, had been said on either side to brighten any uncomfortable remembrances of the last conversation.

"Stir the fire, and make a blaze, Barnes," said the Admiral, as the clock struck a quarter to four. "They must be here in a minute ; and tell Mrs. Easton to go and look at the bedroom fires again. Is the cart come back from Wingfield yet, with Mrs. Graham's boxes ?"

"It is expected every minute, sir. Mrs. Graham said it was to call for them at three, and she and the young ladies would walk."

"Yes, yes, I know. Go down the avenue, and look if they are coming."

Barnes went, and returned with no tidings, and was sent again, and came back to report that the ladies were coming up to the house, and a gentleman with them ; he thought it was Mr. Egerton.

The Admiral rubbed his hands together, slowly ; it was a trick he had when anything pleased him. "Stir the fire again, Barnes ; draw the arm-chair out. I hear them, don't I ? Why do they

ring the bell?" He sat up in his chair, knocking his stick against the floor: Barnes left the room. "Don't shut the door; what do you do that for? Leave it, I say." If his foot had been one degree less swollen, he would certainly have risen, and walked across the room.

The party lingered for a minute in the hall, laughing and talking, taking off goloshes and cloaks; the Admiral's voice was heard, "Come in, Frances! Why don't you come? what are you waiting for? Egerton, are you there? Come in, man. What, my little Susan!" and as Susan, being the first ready, hastened to answer the call, he caught her in his arms, kissed her on both cheeks, turned her to the light, that he might look at her, and then, making her bend down to him, stroked her face as he would that of an infant, and said, tremulously, "There, kiss me again, child; you make a fool of me."

He held her hand in his, even when Mrs. Graham came in, looking at the same time for Claude, who was still in the hall, speaking to Barnes.

"Thank you, Frances, my dear, for coming to cheer an old man. And Isabella and Anna, too; let me look at you, my pretty ones." But he did not look at them, or at least only for a moment; his eyes again being directed to the door.

"Mr. Egerton came with us," said Mrs. Graham.

"Mr. Egerton! Pshaw! Claude to you! why not?"

"Well! Claude, if you will, my dear sir, and if he will. I like it much better; only one must pay proper respect to members of Parliament. He walked into Wingfield, to ask some questions about Kate Hope, the lame girl I wrote you word about; you remember, I dare say."

"Lame girls! not a bit. What has Claude Egerton to do with lame girls? Susan, darling, just rub my foot, gently, very gently."

Susan took off her bonnet, laid it on the floor, and knelt down beside him.

"And so you walked, did you? Barnes says the roads are in a great mess. But—here he is;" Claude came into the room, and the Admiral broke off abruptly.

Claude seemed a little doubtful of his reception, and with reason. The Admiral held out his hand, and shook it cordially, but his tone was grumbling. "I thought you were snowed in at Ivors, or locked up; it's all much the same. I suppose you have done nothing but sit over the fire, and tell stories to your fine-lady friends. You couldn't remember an old man."

Claude made an apology, but only laughed a little consciously. Mrs. Graham came to his assistance.

"Mr. Egerton had a bad cold, he told me, the day before yesterday, and to-day you see, my dear sir, he has taken the first opportunity possible to come to you."

"Thank you," said Claude; "you make more excuses for me than I should make for myself. I always trust to my friends' knowledge of me, to put me right at last. I don't think I am given to change."

The Admiral was brought round by having, as he imagined, given pain, and said, heartily, "Some folks might stay away for ever, and I wouldn't ask twice for them; but Claude Egerton isn't of that number. Susan, my love, aren't you tired?"

Claude brought a chair for Susan to sit down, but she declined it. "I suppose I could not take your duty from you," he said, and he stretched out his hand, and laughingly compared it with hers. "I should scarcely have so light a touch."

"It is a woman's business," said Susan; "I couldn't give it up."

The Admiral caught her hand and looked at it. "A useful little hand, eh, Frances?" and he appealed to Mrs. Graham: "What do you say?"

"We have tried to make it so; I don't know how we have succeeded," was the reply.

"Very badly," said Susan. "Isabella and Anna can both make cakes, and mine are all so heavy they are not eatable."

"I didn't know that making cakes was a nineteenth century accomplishment," observed Claude. "I fancied that it was a great-grandmother practice."

"I like great-grandmother practices," said Susan.

"In theory," remarked Mrs. Graham. "You wouldn't like them if you had to carry them out thoroughly."

Claude spoke eagerly. "No indeed; give me a woman of the present day, if she is fit for anything."

"If," muttered the Admiral to himself.

Claude continued: "It is not fair to judge of any age by its exceptions; one must take classes as a whole, and as they are represented in books of the day. Look at the Spectator, for instance, a very fair specimen of the habits and tone of mind of the period. One would scarcely wish to see English ladies now what English ladies were when the Spectator was the popular book of the day."

"Fine ladies for your taste, then!" said the Admiral testily:

"singing, dancing, and flirting, and reading novels ; that is not our way, is it, my little Susan?"

Susan smiled, was going to reply, but hesitated.

"Please speak," said Claude ; "say what you were going to say."

"I was going to say that I understood you," replied Susan, slightly blushing, "but perhaps I don't."

"I think you do, I have no doubt of it ; Mrs. Graham I am sure does."

Susan was silent, and rubbed a little more diligently. Mrs. Graham answered : "We all understand. Queen Anne's virtues are not really inconsistent with Queen Victoria's ; and Queen Victoria's are much the more graceful of the two."

"And I like graceful virtues," said Claude.

"Of course, all young men do," muttered the Admiral.

"And virtues not full-blown, but opening, ripening," said Claude ; "giving one the pleasure of interest and hope."

Mrs. Graham checked a smile which was upon her lips, and said, rather gravely : "Yes, when one is tolerably sure that they will eventually come to perfection."

"One may be sure where there is truth, don't you think so, mamma?" said Susan.

Claude interrupted the reply : "Truth, candour, warmth of feeling,—all must come right then."

"Pshaw!" escaped from the Admiral.

Susan spoke again, a little as though it were an effort. "One can bear with so much where there is truth, it makes up for so many faults."

"Yes," Claude paused ; and the next moment added hurriedly : "and where there have been temptations and difficulties, one can't be surprised at faults."

"I don't know what you are talking about," interrupted the Admiral, gruffly ; "and you don't know yourself. You had better all go up stairs, Frances, and take off your bonnets."

Susan stood up ; her sisters and Mrs. Graham followed the suggestion, but the Admiral detained her, he wanted his pillow smoothed.

Claude was silent and thoughtful. Presently he said, abruptly, "Helen wants to talk to you ; you will be at Ivors church to-morrow."

"I hope so ; we intend to be. We shall meet after the service."

"She is interested in Kate Hope's case, and would like to do something for her."

"Would she? how kind? but it is like her, she is always generous."

"She has more money than she knows what to do with," said the Admiral.

"A reason with many people for doing nothing," replied Claude.

"Helen would do a great deal if she were put in the way of it," observed Susan eagerly; "but no one helps her. She always makes me think of a hidden gem."

"A diamond uncut," said Claude in a low voice.

"Requiring a monstrous deal of cutting," remarked the Admiral, quickly.

Susan leant over his chair and kissed him, and whispered that he was hard upon Helen.

He looked at her fondly, sadly: "Not so hard upon her, child, as you are upon yourself: now run away."

Claude followed her into the hall. "May I say one word to you; I would have said it to Mrs. Graham if she had given me the opportunity."

Susan stopped to listen at the foot of the stairs. Her manner and attitude, so simply kind, unaffected, lady-like, though without any pretension to actual grace, struck him forcibly. His cold, rather stiff tone changed; he spoke to her as a friend: "I am sure you will forgive me,—understand me,—you will not think I am taking a liberty; but if you can,—this poor girl is an object of interest to Helen, and I think it would please her; it might be good:"—he corrected himself, and concluded hastily, "any means by which she could be put in the way of being useful she would like: I said I would mention it."

Susan had an impulse; she was not in the habit of yielding to impulses, but she did to this one. She held out her hand to Claude, and said: "Yes; indeed you may depend upon it: Helen is so noble she can never live for herself." The blood rushed to her cheeks in a moment, as with the consciousness that she had betrayed her own knowledge of his feelings; and, withdrawing her hand with difficulty from Claude's cordial grasp, she hurried up stairs.

CHAPTER XVII.

THIS evening was a happy one for the Admiral, notwithstanding his incipient distrust of Claude Egerton's matrimonial intentions. His mind had retained through life much of a child's easy forget-

fulness of annoyance ; and when he found himself tolerably free from pain, with Mrs. Graham to talk to him, Susan sitting by his gouty stool reading, and Isabella and Anna at work at a side-table, just as if they were at home, he forgot every thing but the comfort of having loving faces around him.

"You had best come and live with me entirely, Frances, as I have told you many times: plenty of room here, and you'd have it all your own way." Mrs. Graham smiled. "Ah! you may smile; I know what you think! One mind to-day another to-morrow;—but that's not my fashion, except (and he laughed) when the twinges come, and then you would bear with them."

"I might bear with them better than you would with us, my dear sir;—you have lived too long alone."

"Bachelor ways, you mean;—I should be all the better for being worked out of them."

"Not at seventy-eight. You would grow tired of us."

"And we should grow tired of you, you may as well add," said the Admiral.

Mrs. Graham hesitated for an instant, and looked round at her children.

"Your mother and I want some quiet words together," said the Admiral. "There's a fire burning brightly in the next room; take your work in there, girls. Forgive me, Susan," and he stretched out his hand to her; "you shall come back before long. Isabella, you don't mind being treated like a child?" Isabella came up to his chair:—"You look better and brighter than you used to do, my pretty one;—go and dance the polka, if you like, in there."

Isabella laughed. "We are too busy for the polka. Mamma, we needn't hurry about going to bed if we have not finished our work?"

"Not a bit; stay up all night if you like it. Liberty Hall here!" said the Admiral. "Not a word, Frances; I am master in my own house."

"Exactly what I wish you always to remain, my dear sir," said Mrs. Graham, as her children left the room; and laying her hand kindly upon his, she added, "and what you scarcely could be if we lived with you."

"And why not? What's to hinder me from going my way, and you from going yours?"

"Because our interests would be different."

"I don't see that."

"Our objects, perhaps I ought to say," replied Mrs. Graham. "I am bound to consult what I think to be my children's good."

"Well, and they would learn no harm here," said the Admiral.

"No harm; but would it be for their highest good? We should differ sometimes about that."

"And I should give in," said the Admiral: "I have given in all my life. You may laugh, but I have."

"Yes, indeed, I know you have given in continually in great matters, but in little ones I don't think you know how you would be fretted."

"Well, then, you must give in sometimes," said the Admiral.

"Ah! there would be the difficulty. I am afraid I couldn't promise."

"What! not with all your boast of fine principles. Where's the use of them?"

"I try not to boast," replied Mrs. Graham, quietly. "What I fear is, that my principles would teach me not to give in, and that in consequence we should not be happy. The children require so much careful training still."

"Children! Fine young women, you mean! It's a shame to keep them in leading-strings."

"Exactly so; but then I must try and place them where they can best learn to run alone."

"Well and there's room enough here."

"Too much. A great deal of space, and not sufficient to occupy it. I mean," added Mrs. Graham, seeing the Admiral's impatient expression of countenance, "that to bring them here would be removing them from all their little duties and interests in Wingfield, and placing them in a position of luxury to which they have never been accustomed, and which could not be theirs for life."

"I don't see why it shouldn't be, why I am to think so much of my nephews and cousins," muttered the Admiral.

"My dear sir, you know we have discussed that point before when we were not influenced by private wishes. We both feel that God, by our natural relationships, marks out the channels in which our wealth, if we have it, is ordinarily to flow. You could not give, and I could not receive consistently with our notions of justice. We have gone on happily for several years with this understanding, why should it be altered now?"

"But you might live here for the present," repeated the Admiral, turning from the subject which he disliked, to that which pleased him. Mrs. Graham only smiled. She did not dare remind him again that the next day his wishes might change; but, dwelling upon her own feelings, she said, "I think, if you understood my three girls thoroughly, you would see how much better suited to

them their present life is than that which they would lead here. They want occupation, all of them, Isabella, especially; she is so morbid, naturally; her mind preys upon itself if it has not enough to interest it in others."

"She would be dull here," said the Admiral, a little moodily.

"Not dull, exactly," replied Mrs. Graham; "but the easy, luxurious life would foster all her weaknesses. She is very excitable, enthusiastically fond of music and poetry, and can't exist in inaction. With a mind of that description it is not enough for safety, at least so I think, to live out of the gay world and avoid novels and poetry. Imagination will supply all these, and do quite as much mischief. What is wanted is healthy occupation, kind sympathies, something which shall draw it out of itself in thought for others. Ease and leisure would do Isabella more harm than foolish books."

"And so you are all to sacrifice yourselves to Isabella?" said the Admiral.

"I could say something of the same kind as regards the others," replied Mrs. Graham. "Anna has a superabundant amount of energy which would make her perfectly miserable if it had not some vent. And she is not old enough to find this for herself, wherever she may be; and Susan ——"

"Aye! my little Susan! what fault do you find with her?"

"None," said Mrs. Graham, emphatically, "of all my children she is the most fitted for any position: about whom I have the least anxiety."

"Any position," murmured the Admiral. He moved himself round slowly, looked Mrs. Graham fully in the face, and added: "Claude Egerton is a fool."

Mrs. Graham became suddenly pale, but she answered calmly, "God's providence is in these things. We had better not speak of them. No doubt Mr. Egerton will choose for his own happiness."

"Folly! Frances, you make me angry. Do you mean to say that, if Claude throws himself away upon yonder gay, singing, flirting girl at Ivors, he will have half the chance of happiness that he would have if he took to our little Susan?"

"Helen does not flirt, dear sir," said Mrs. Graham, earnestly; "and Susan is—may be—too like Claude to make him happy."

"Too like! what on earth do men require in a wife but something like themselves?"

"They require what they want, not what they have," said Mrs. Graham.

"Humph!" was the Admiral's only reply.

Mrs. Graham continued, "You will forgive me, I am sure, for asking that this subject may be a sealed one between us. I have the greatest dread of allowing my mind to form any wishes in such matters: I could never trust myself in action if I did. Of course I don't mean that I would interfere to prevent my children from marrying, but I would wish to leave such an event simply and entirely in the hands of God. Especially when, as in the present case, I see reason to believe that He has ordered a certain course of circumstances, I should desire to acquiesce in it, and, as far as I might be permitted, to further it."

"I don't see the thing as you do. That old step-mother sets the snare, and he falls into it."

Mrs. Graham could scarcely restrain a smile, but she answered gravely, "I am afraid we look at instruments till we forget the Hand that guides them. It is no matter to me how the feeling may have been brought about, if only it exists."

"But does he care for her? What does he see in her beyond her pretty face?" inquired the Admiral.

"A great deal, I dare say, which I can see too," replied Mrs. Graham. "Helen is to me my sister's child, not Lady Augusta's step-daughter."

"Ah, well, yes!" muttered the Admiral, more complacently. "But I can't forget:—she's been trained, taught. The old woman has been at her ever since she was seven years old."

"And has done marvellously little to ruin her," said Mrs. Graham. "Helen's faults are external. Lady Augusta has never destroyed the truth of her character."

"And you wouldn't try to set Claude Egerton right?" asked the Admiral, in a tone which showed that he was ashamed of his own proposition. "You wouldn't bring him and Susan together, and open his eyes before it is too late?"

Mrs. Graham started. "Not for the world! It might be fatal to the happiness of both, even if it were not cruel to Helen."

"And if Susan loses her heart without our troubling ourselves?" said the Admiral: "such things have been."

"And may be," replied Mrs. Graham, thoughtfully and sadly; "but I have the greatest confidence in Susan. She is quite aware that Mr. Egerton admires Helen; even if the feeling goes no farther, that alone would be a sufficient safeguard."

"You women have such trust in yourselves," was the Admiral's reply, as he rang the bell for tea; and a pang shot through Mrs. Graham's heart, which she did not pause to analyse.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE Christmas service at Ivors church was over. Sir Henry, Lady Augusta, and Maurice waited in the church porch for the carriage. Claude and Helen walked towards the gate leading into the high road. They were silent. Claude looked back occasionally at the church, but Helen's eyes were bent upon the ground.

"We will come this way," said Claude, as a party of strangers, talking loudly, followed closely upon them. He turned into a little side path, carefully kept, and marked at intervals by fuchsias and laurels. It led them by a large stone tomb, enclosed by high railings.

Helen paused before it, and Claude saw that he had brought her to her mother's grave.

He read the inscription to himself, with the text, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

"It was her own choice," said Helen. "She was very humble."

"And true and earnest," continued Claude: "I felt it when I saw her, though it was once only, when I was a boy."

"She was like Aunt Fanny," said Helen. "Papa says I might have been like her too if she had lived; but that could not have been."

Claude regarded her earnestly. "Is it so impossible?"

"I am wilful," said Helen, "and changeable, and—oh! more than you know or can think;" and she stooped down to gather an ivy leaf, and turned away her head to hide the tears which gathered in her eyes.

"And humble," said Claude, gently, "if you think of yourself so."

Helen raised herself, and looked at him fixedly. "No, not humble. I speak evil of myself, but I could not bear that others should speak evil of me. I don't know why I should say this," she added; "some think that it is bad to talk of oneself, even of one's faults."

"To some persons, perhaps,—those who do not care for or feel with you," said Claude, his voice slightly trembling; "but, Helen, that would not be with me."

"It may be better that it should be," she replied. "You would soon be weary of my confessions."

"Scarcely, if I could be any comfort or help to you."

Helen smiled. There might have been a little disdain in the expression, and Claude, in a moment, was chilled; and added, coldly, "Of course I have no wish to intrude upon your confidence."

Helen answered him frankly:—"I annoyed you by smiling; you are very apt to take offence. I was not thinking of you, but of myself, and the hopelessness of making you or any one understand a maze of inconsistencies."

"And therefore you will never give any one the opportunity of trying to understand them," said Claude.

"It is not a case for experiment," said Helen. "If we give our confidence, and are not understood, there is a barrier raised for ever. No, Claude, if we are to be friends, we had better be contented to remain as we are, enigmas to each other."

"Am I an enigma to you?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, in many ways: what you live for, what you care for, why you should throw so much energy into everything you do,—into all this parliamentary business, for instance. Some people understand it, I see. Aunt Fanny does; so does Susan: their minds are like yours."

"Their principles, perhaps, rather," said Claude. "In some things we must all be alike, Helen. We have the same feelings, passions, affections. There must, therefore, be the groundwork of mutual understanding between us all, especially —. We have known each other so many years."

"Not known," said Helen. "We don't know each other now." She spoke rather sadly, and moved on, seemingly anxious to be with the rest of the party. Claude followed her. They drew near to Lady Augusta. Mrs. Graham and Susan had joined her; Isabella and Anna were already gone. Claude quickened his step, and came up to Helen as they approached the porch. "I am going to the Lodge," he said: "would it be impossible for you to go too?"

Helen hesitated. "I am not sure: I should like it."

Claude caught at the words "like it." "Should you, really? There could be no reason against it. And I might explain,—if it were possible, that is,—and if you would care to hear. I would rather not be an enigma to you."

Helen was silent.

"May I propose it? Do you think Lady Augusta would object?" he added, anxiously.

Helen's answer was still indistinct. Hurrying forward, she left him, and began talking quickly, and rather nervously, to her aunt and Susan.

Claude lingered. His heart beat so rapidly that he was almost faint. Yet why should it? He had risen that morning calm, collected, strong in purpose, renouncing, as he believed, all thought of Helen, as she might be,—looking upon her only as she was. He had compared her with his own ideal, and with Susan Graham's excellencies, and pronounced her wanting. He had said to himself that the Admiral was right, and she was unsuited to him,—that she could not make him happy,—that she would disappoint him,—that it was vain to think of educating a woman after marriage,—that the petty distractions and frettings of domestic life must mar the work. He had reasoned like a sage; and then he had gone down to breakfast,—listened to Helen's sweet, cordial tones of Christmas greeting,—watched her, as with her animation, grace, and beauty she made herself the life and ornament of the breakfast party,—walked in the colonnade and thought of her,—accompanied her to church, and knelt by her,—and the reason of the sage was gone.

A weak man might have dreaded his weakness. Claude Eger-ton, strong in his strength, placed himself without fear in the post of danger. He came up to Helen and Susan just as they were told the carriage was ready, and whilst Susan was beginning to talk to Helen about Kate Hope. Helen said nothing about going to the Lodge; she might have forgotten it or changed her mind. She only seemed desirous that her cousin should be at Ivors very early the next day, in order that they might have some time together before the arrival of the visitors, who were to be present at the school feast. All her interest seemed concentrated in this; she scarcely noticed Claude, and answered him abruptly when he addressed her. Claude was better then; more the master of himself, but he was still bent upon having Helen with him. He recollected that he was anxious for her good, and had wished her to talk to Mrs. Graham and Susan about Kate Hope, in order to give her some feeling of usefulness. He was not aware that any other motive influenced him; but when Lady Augusta summoned Helen to the carriage he interposed his own wish. "It seemed a pity," he said, "to interrupt Helen and Miss Graham when they were so busy with their conversation. If Lady Augusta did not object, he was going himself to the Lodge for luncheon, and if Helen liked to go too, he could easily escort her back, the distance was not great." Lady Augusta was only too willing, as long as "dear Helen" did not tire herself, that was the only thing to be considered; and Claude turned to Helen, considering her assent a matter of course,—and Helen declined.

Claude went to the Lodge; but even Mrs. Graham's charity could scarcely allow that he was agreeable. Certainly not as he should have been on Christmas Day.

Helen had acted from instinct. She had no time for reason, and at the moment no particular cause for feeling. It was only when she reached home, and thought over the little incidents of the morning, that she could at all understand why she had so suddenly changed her mind. And even then it was not clear to her. She shrank from putting an interpretation upon Claude's manner which it might not properly bear. It seemed undignified, unwomanly, to suspect feelings which might have no existence; she turned away from the thought; it disturbed her. She liked Claude very much; it pleased her to talk with him, he was a person who she felt might do her good, give her interest, even gain her confidence, but this was all. She laid aside her bonnet and cloak, and with them determined to lay aside these new, uncomfortable suspicions; but the resolution was more easily made than kept. Claude came back from the Lodge, grave and out of spirits; and Helen found herself wondering what was the cause. She tried to speak to him in her usual tone, but his answers were short; he would not carry on any conversation. At last even Sir Henry remarked his manner, and then he said he had a headache, and went to his room. Helen thought him cross and disagreeable, and was disappointed in him. She had fancied him above fits of ill-humour; and if he was ill, it was weak and unmanly to give way. He appeared at dinner time, better, and more like himself; but still he talked entirely to Sir Henry upon politics, and Lady Augusta could with difficulty make him give his opinion upon the few questions which arose as to the next day's proceedings.

Altogether it was a dull, uncomfortable Christmas Day, and entirely owing to Claude. Helen went to bed really angry with him. In the morning she had been particularly happy, because particularly full of good resolutions. The service at church had soothed her, and the short conversation with Claude had touched, and softened, and given her hope of sympathy. That all should have vanished so suddenly without cause, was provoking and perplexing. Life was as unsatisfactory as ever to her before she laid her head on her pillow that night, for if a gleam of sunshine came, it seemed destined to be immediately darkened with a cloud.

CHAPTER XIX.

"DEAR Susan! this really is most delightful," was Helen's exclamation, the next morning when, about eleven o'clock, Susan made her appearance, in what was especially called Miss Clare's room. "I was so afraid when I heard the bell, that it was that dreadful woman, Miss Manners."

"I passed her on the road, I suspect," replied Susan, "in a fly; her man on the box and her maid inside; and such an array of luggage! Does she always arrive so early, and with such appurtenances? She must be a trying individual to live with."

"Rise at five, coffee at seven, breakfast at ten, luncheon at two, dinner at six, tea at eight, supper at eleven. I have heard her run through the hours fifty times. She looks upon her mode of life, as I suppose a monk of La Trappe does upon his silence. It covers all sins. The one thing she can't pardon is sleep."

"May it never be my fate to live with her," said Susan, "though I could envy her. We were late last night, and I feel now, in consequence, as if I had been at a ball."

"Late! were you?" said Helen, "and merry, I suppose."

"Yes, very. The Admiral was in such high spirits at having us with him."

"Just the reverse of us. We were in the depths of dullness; Claude Egerton worst of all. What did you do to him, Susan, at the Lodge?"

"He was very dull with us," said Susan, "and I thought—" she paused.

"Well! what did you think? I long to have an excuse for him."

"I thought," and Susan seemed a little confused, and afraid of her own words, "that perhaps he would have been better pleased if you had been there to walk back with him."

Helen laughed consciously. "He asked me. I thought I would; but—I don't know why—I changed my mind when it came to the point."

"He won't like that," said Susan, rather gravely.

"Which won't much signify to me," replied Helen.

Susan looked up quickly. "Do you mean you would really not care to vex him?"

"Care! why should I?"

"He is so good," said Susan. "I should be very sorry to worry him."

"Precisely the reason why I enjoy it. Don't put on that demure look, Susan, dear. It is only, you know, for the pleasure of bringing out his goodness. But what makes you so bent upon upholding him?"

"It is merely because I respect him very much," replied Susan.

"And so do I sometimes respect him, till I am out of breath with respect; but it is not a very pleasant feeling."

"Don't you think so?" said Susan, quietly.

"No, any more than it is pleasant to raise one's head till it aches for the gratification of looking at a painted ceiling: one loses all sense of pleasure in the painfulness of the position. Give me something that I may laugh at, and with; tease one moment and make friends with the next. That will never be Claude Egerton."

"Never!" said Susan, emphatically. "But, Helen, if you were not always true, I should think now that you were untrue."

"Should you—why?" and Helen slightly coloured.

"Because it is not the way you used to talk. You have agreed with me so often in liking people who are superior."

"Perhaps I have in other cases."

"Perhaps you agree in this, only you won't acknowledge it."

"I don't know." Helen's manner changed, and she became more serious. "I might have said differently yesterday, but I can't bear moods; and if he is so *respectable*, why does he have them?"

"If you yourself caused them," replied Susan, "you ought not to complain of them." There was some hesitation in the tone in which this was said, and Susan's eyes for one moment rested anxiously on her cousin, and then were bent again upon the ground.

"He has no right to have moods because of any thing which I do," answered Helen with some dignity; "we are friends only."

Susan started,—Lady Augusta's name escaped her lips, and then she was silent.

Helen regarded her in surprise. "What do you mean by all this, Susan?" she exclaimed. "There is some mystery."

"None, nothing,—dear Helen, we may all have been mistaken."

Helen drew herself up. "You are, indeed, if you think that Claude is any thing to me, or that I am any thing to him. I don't understand interference with my private feelings."

"Then your private feelings should not be spoken of so loudly, my love!" said a voice behind her. And Helen and Susan turned and saw Lady Augusta.

Helen's cheek flushed angrily. "My own room! I did not

expect——” She paused, not daring to trust herself. Susan, though unconscious of any offence, was the picture of guilt.

“A room ceases to be private, Helen,” said Lady Augusta, with quiet sarcasm, “when the door is left open, and conversation is carried on in a tone which may be heard by the whole house. Susan, you will excuse my requesting you to leave us; and,” she thought for an instant,—“I must beg that none of Helen’s imprudent and undignified remarks may be repeated.”

Helen’s face expressed the wild passion of her childhood. She caught her cousin’s hand, as Susan was leaving the room, and exclaimed; “Tell her, Susan, tell her;—what have I said? Imprudent, undignified? I spoke but the truth, and I will say it again before fifty thousand witnesses.”

“That will not be required, my love; even one may be too many. Susan, I must again beg you to leave us.”

And Helen tossed her cousin’s hand away, exclaiming; “Yes, go; I am equal to my own cause!” and with a sudden check upon herself, sat down opposite to Lady Augusta; her hands folded together, her figure upright and still,—only betraying her feelings by the sudden paleness of her face and the deep crimson spot which burned upon it.

Lady Augusta carefully closed the door, returned again to the fire, and stirred it with the most provoking slowness; then, standing before it, said in the same unruffled manner: “This excitement, Helen, does not suit you; it belongs to your childhood. I desire only to give you a warning.”

“I will take care to guard against interruption another time,” replied Helen.

“You are angry, my love, unjustly. I wish there was no one in the house who had more reason for anger. But Claude, alas!”——

“Mamma!” Helen rose from her seat, and came opposite to Lady Augusta, and spoke in a tone harsh with agitation; “I don’t wish to hear his name.”

“Yet he may wish to hear yours, Helen; and he would have great cause for complaint, if he were to know the tone in which you think fit to speak of him.”

“I am free,” exclaimed Helen; “my opinion and my feelings are my own. Claude has never given me cause——” she stopped, remembered his manner on the preceding day, and was silent.

“Conscience! I see it,” continued Lady Augusta; “Claude has given you cause, at least, to treat him with the respect due to a man who looks upon you with more than common interest.”

"I can't weigh the difference between common and uncommon interest," replied Helen; "but it frets me, it would fret any one, to have feelings imagined which don't exist."

"Not on your side, probably," said Lady Augusta, quietly.

"Nor on Claude's!" exclaimed Helen; yet the denial was accompanied by a glance which seemed as if it would penetrate into the secret recesses of Lady Augusta's knowledge.

But no glance had ever yet mastered the intricacies of the chambers of that heart; and Lady Augusta, with perfect placidity, answered; "You must not inquire as to Claude's feelings from me. Those who know the most are seldom the most at liberty to speak; but I would warn you, Helen, that a careless word may, when we little think it, wound the tenderest point. If you do not care for Claude, at least do not be unkind to him."

Helen's eyes filled with tears of self-reproach. "Unkind! Mamma, you know I would not pain even an insect. But it is not true—it is impossible. He cannot like"—she stopped—"yes, he does like me, but,"—a burning blush crimsoned her face,—“he cannot love me."

Lady Augusta kissed her,—it was her only reply,—and left the room.

Two o'clock came; the Ivors household was in a state of unwonted agitation. There was to be an early dinner,—a sacrifice on the altar of duty. Lady Louisa Stuart and Mrs. Grey had just arrived, and were gone upstairs to take off their bonnets. Miss Manners and Maurice's friend, Mr. Pearson, had made their appearance more than an hour before; Miss Manners having seized upon the gentleman, with whom she had a slight acquaintance, as he was walking from Wingfield, and forced him to share her fly, in order that she might learn the latest Oxford intelligence.

Claude wandered from room to room in the midst of the bustle, very much as if he had no concern in it, though Lady Augusta put him prominently forward, introducing him to her guests as the real cause of the festivities. She seized upon him before dinner, and when she was going upstairs with Lady Louisa Stuart,—"Louisa, my dear, Mr. Egerton, our new member; our own member, I should say. Claude, Lady Louisa Stuart. I am quite glad to have the opportunity of introducing two such good conservatives to each other."

"Every new member on the side of established principle is a great gain in these troubled days," began Lady Louisa, speaking with a full round voice, which seemed to encase her words and give

them double force. "What is it the Archbishop of York says?—

'We are all diseased,
And with our surfeiting and wanton hours
Have brought ourselves into a burning fever,
And we must bleed for it.'

Claude looked a surprised ignorance both of surfeiting and fever. Lady Augusta laughed, "You forget, my dear Louisa, that the only archbishop likely to be reckoned amongst Mr. Egerton's acquaintances, is a worthy gentleman of the nineteenth century. But Claude will understand soon. It is very pleasant, very fresh and inspiring, to live in those wonderful Shakspearian days, as if they were real. I quite long to see that little Essay on 'Much ado about Nothing,' which you promised to send me the other day. What! must n't I speak about it?" for Lady Louisa's face expressed a proper amount of bashfulness on the subject of her own compositions. "You need n't mind Claude. He is quite one of ourselves—quite. By the bye, Claude, do me the favour just to look into the library, and see if Helen is there, and tell her I want to speak to her in my dressing-room."

Claude obeyed, listening, whilst he crossed the hall, to the rolling tones of Lady Louisa's voice, as she walked slowly up the stairs, discoursing in sentences which, if they were not Shakspearian, were formed after the same model.

He found Helen in the library, Miss Manners with her. He knew it must be Miss Manners, from her sharp features, restless eye, and the easy tone which none but a very dear friend of Lady Augusta would have ventured to adopt with Helen. She was at home with Claude directly, no introduction was required: "Mr. Egerton, of course; I knew it must be—a singular consciousness that is which touches the inward perception so instantaneously."

Claude bowed and gave his message; Miss Manners listened with the air of one who considered that it equally concerned herself, and delivered her opinion upon it. "You must go, my dear, your good mamma needs you. Don't let her fatigue herself. The working of the mind on these occasions is exhausting. I recommend a little care for yourself too, and a glass of sal volatile, or camphor julep: you are wofully pale."

Helen was very pale when Miss Manners addressed her, but Claude's eye, as it turned upon her, brought the colour back again to her cheeks.

"Don't mind me, my dear," continued Miss Manners, "I shall find my own way to my room. I can send my maid to inquire if

there is any difficulty, and I sha'n't trouble about dress. Early dinners don't need dress."

Helen's eye involuntarily turned to Claude. Perhaps, looking at Miss Manners' black cloth jacket and crumpled frills, she thought that early dinners did sometimes need dress."

"Go, my dear, go," continued Miss Manners; and as Helen still seemed inclined to delay, she went herself to the door, and opened it. "I don't want you to go, Mr. Egerton."

Helen murmured to herself, "Odious woman!" but she had been accustomed to obey Miss Manners by a kind of instinct, and she went. Claude, being less habitually obedient, took no notice of the suggestion of the lady's wish to cultivate his acquaintance, but followed Helen into the hall.

"She is odious!" exclaimed Helen, as the door closed behind them; and she stood still, leaning against the balustrade of the staircase.

"She is absurd!" said Claude. "One must look upon her in that light."

"Yes, if one can." But Helen seemed wanting in strength and spirits for the effort.

"You are tired," said Claude, anxiously, "and ill?"

"No, no, there is nothing the matter." Helen tried to pass him to go up the stairs.

He placed himself in her way. "I have not seen you before, this morning, Helen; at least, scarcely with the opportunity of speaking to you."

"I have been engaged," said Helen, pausing evidently against her will.

"And you would not let me help you in any thing?" continued Claude. "I deserve that for yesterday."

"I don't understand," said Helen. "We had no quarrel yesterday."

Claude looked annoyed, and answered shortly, "I thought I might have displeased you by my dullness. I was dull."

"Yes," said Helen, "you were, certainly; but you seem better to-day."

The matter-of-fact speech threw Claude back; and, in a reproachful tone, he said: "I know that I have no right to expect sympathy with dullness from you, whatever may be the cause."

"I must go to mamma," was Helen's hasty reply, and passing him on the other side she ran upstairs.

"Deep in the mysteries of thought, Mr. Egerton?" said Miss Manners, in her sharp voice, as she came out of the library, and

found Claude standing in the hall, with folded arms and a fixed eye. I fancied I heard Helen talking with you still."

"Miss Clare is gone to Lady Augusta," replied Claude.

"A charming creature, full of sympathies which need only a hand to touch and excite them!" said Miss Manners, meaningly.

"Very likely; I am afraid I am in your way," and Claude moved aside, and Miss Manners, with a manly and determined tread, ascended the broad staircase.

CHAPTER XX.

HAPPILY for Claude, the employment of the next hour prevented his being closely observed by any one but Lady Augusta. The early dinner was little more than a rather ceremonious luncheon; people helped themselves and their neighbours, and laughed and talked without any solemn pauses; and no one being particularly called upon to be agreeable, every one was so, Claude and Helen excepted. Helen was at the further end of the table, far removed from Claude, who was seated between Mrs. Grey and Susan, neither of whom required much conversation. It was by a little manoeuvre that Helen had placed herself in this position. Claude remarked it, but no one else. In the same way, when dinner was over, she managed to escape him, and devote herself to Mrs. Grey; very kindly and thoughtfully, it might have seemed, since Mrs. Grey was an old lady requiring such respect, but the motive was sufficiently clear to Claude's jealous eye. She understood and avoided him; a galling thought it was. He tried to turn away from the consciousness of the fact, and when the party dispersed after dinner, and Lady Augusta summoned him, as one of her particular favourites, to assist in preparing the magic lanthorn for the school-children, he threw himself into the work with an energy, the only motive of which was the desire of distracting his mind. Even then he did not know the extent of his own feelings; he had no definite wishes nor intentions. It was the fascination of a spell which drew him forward. But he no longer thought about Helen, he only felt. His eye followed her wherever she moved; he heard the soft tones of her voice amidst the loudest murmurs of conversation; he knew when she was in the room, even though he were not looking at her; he was conscious of her return, whatever at the moment might be engaging his attention. He was miserable in her absence, restless

in her presence ; and yet with an exterior so cold, hard, almost repulsive ! Even kind-hearted Mrs. Grey whispered to Lady Louisa Stuart, as she watched him, " Augusta says he is a first-rate man, my dear ; but, somehow, I think first-rate men are apt to be disagreeable."

And in this state of mind, Claude found himself in a distant corner of the servants' hall, by the side of Susan Graham, whilst the school-children were seated at two long tables, — piles of cake, and cups of tea and coffee before them, and Miss Manners, as head manager and waiter, rushing from one to the other, telling one to be grateful, and another not to eat too fast, lamenting, in an under-tone to Lady Augusta, that the animal nature should be so much more rapidly developed than the spiritual ; yet very good-naturedly, at the same time, handing the cups to be refilled and the empty dishes to be replenished. Lady Augusta was to be seen at the end of the room, looking proudly benevolent ; Helen, by Mrs. Grey's arm-chair, tired and mentally worn. Claude's eye had been resting on her for some time ; he was not conscious of Susan's presence, till he heard her say, " What a pleasant face Mrs. Grey has, for an old lady !"

" Yes ;" and Claude just looked round, but said no more.

" It is like Lady Augusta's and yet not like," continued Susan ; " like, with a different expression, and there is so much in that. Helen says —"

Claude's face was directed towards her in an instant. Susan continued :

" Helen says that it is merely kindness which makes it so pleasant ; but to me there is something in it higher than mere benevolence."

Mrs. Grey, just at that moment, rose to leave the room. Leaning on Helen's arm, she drew near the spot where Claude and Susan were. She stopped, and spoke to Helen. " This is your cousin, Miss Graham, my love, isn't it ? I must make acquaintance with her." She gave her hand to Susan. " We have a very pleasant sight here, my dear ? so many happy little faces, and all owing to you, Mr. Egerton. We must be grateful to you, as well as to dear Lady Augusta. I wanted to congratulate you before on your success, but you have been too busy to give me the opportunity."

Claude bowed, and was very much obliged, and offered his arm to Mrs. Grey.

" Thank you, but I have a good support, you see ;" and a kindly smile passed over the old lady's face. " I have been very selfish,

my dear," she added, addressing Susan, "in taking Helen away, but I will send her back to you again directly."

Helen's face showed some annoyance, and she said decidedly, "I am not going to return," and Claude,—his face of an ashy paleness,—moved aside, whilst Mrs. Grey and Helen passed on.

"I beg your pardon, did you speak?" asked Claude, addressing Susan suddenly.

Susan had not spoken; she was looking grave and anxious, but she tried to make some common remark about the children, and how they appeared to enjoy themselves.

"Yes; they are of an age when enjoyment is possible." Claude's accent was bitter.

"I hope there is no age when it is quite impossible," said Susan.

"The world must be taken lightly, then," he answered.

"Or reasonably, I suppose," said Susan.

"As I imagine it is by you," he replied, with a faint attempt at a smile. "I can fancy Mrs. Graham's teaching to have been quite upon that principle."

"Mamma has no particular principle, that I know of," replied Susan, quietly, "but that of acting always upon the highest."

He seemed struck by her tone, and answered, with greater interest, "Mrs. Graham is right. There is nothing but that, both for reason and consistency. She is fortunate in having been able to carry it out."

"In herself," said Susan. "It is a case in which it is easier to practise oneself, than to teach others."

"Yet I would willingly have been her pupil," said Claude, earnestly; "she would have taught me much—if not all that she knows herself."

"Experience teaches, I suppose," said Susan, "and" — she hesitated—"disappointment."

He repeated the word, disappointment, to himself, and added, "It ought to teach, but it never does till hope is dead."

"Disappointment does not come until that happens, does it?" said Susan.

"No," and his voice sank; "it is only suspense till then, heart-sickening, wearying. The plunge of the dagger must be a far less evil than the sight of it drawn over one's head."

"Yet one would not accept the plunge," said Susan.

"Would you not? I would," was the stern reply.

Susan was silent for an instant; then she said timidly, "I suppose that is the difference between man and woman's nature."

"I don't understand woman's nature," he replied, shortly.

"Perhaps I don't understand a man's," replied Susan; "one can but speak from one's own feelings. It seems easier to live on with hope, however faint, than to bear the crush of disappointment."

"I would not bear it only," he replied, "I would rise above it; I would cast it from me. Let me but know the worst, — know it soon, — soon," he repeated, in a lower voice.

"And then you would forget?" said Susan.

He made no reply, but turned from her abruptly.

Susan watched him for a few seconds, and soon afterwards, unperceived by any one, glided out of the room in search of Helen.

She found her in her bedroom, lying on a little sofa drawn near the fire, looking pale, and complaining of headache. Her manner was not encouraging to conversation; Susan made several attempts at it, but failed, and was at length obliged to leave her, with the promise of making an excuse to Lady Augusta for her absence.

Helen did not appear again. Claude exhibited the magic lantern to the school-children, and exerted himself for the general entertainment. Mrs. Grey changed her opinion before the evening was over, and thought that Mr. Egerton was a very superior person, only a little stiff just at first; and Lady Louisa Stuart, after a discussion upon Shakspeare's female characters, pronounced him a most agreeable man. Only Susan understood him. And it seemed that he was aware of it, for every now and then, in the intervals of exertion, he came up to her to inquire for Helen, and lingered to say a few words, which, though they only referred to common topics, implied a consciousness that she would read the thoughts which suggested them. Susan longed to tell him more plainly that she could feel for him, to give him hope and comfort; but Claude Egerton could only be approached when he had himself made the first advances. And for hope, — Susan was too perplexed to offer it, even if the opportunity had been afforded her. Helen was more than ever a problem.

Helen was just preparing to go to bed; it was nearly eleven o'clock. She had listened to the parting "good nights" on the staircase, and the loud closing of doors along the gallery, and her hand was on the bell to ring for her maid, when a gentle tap was heard at the door. Lady Augusta entered. Helen's face expressed annoyance.

"I am disturbing you, my love," said Lady Augusta, "but I

could not rest without coming to see you. What is the matter? What is the cause of this headache?"

"Noise and bustle, I suppose, mamma," said Helen, shortly. "Such numbers of people about are enough to give any one a headache."

"Any one who is not strong," said Lady Augusta.

"I am strong," replied Helen; "there is nothing the matter, really."

"Nay, then, my love; if it be so, I have cause for complaint. You have used very little exertion to-day for any person's entertainment."

"Numbers entertain each other," said Helen.

"I differ from you, my dear. There must be leaders in amusement as well as in business. But for Claude Egerton and Miss Manners, I really don't know what we should have done. And it was hard upon Claude too, poor fellow! But he is so unselfish."

"Mamma," said Helen, suddenly, and sitting upright she fixed her eyes steadily on Lady Augusta's face, "you talk of Claude as if you knew his feelings. Do you know them?"

Lady Augusta hesitated. "My love, as I said to you this morning, that is a question you ought not to ask. I only beg of you not to treat him with that marked disregard, which even to an utter stranger would be painful, and which must excite—which has indeed excited—observation. My aunt remarked your manner, so did your father, and Lady Louisa."

"My manner may be right notwithstanding," said Helen.

"Rudeness can never be right," observed Lady Augusta.

"But truth must be," said Helen.

Lady Augusta answered angrily. "You mistake, Helen. You can know nothing of your own mind; young girls never do, until they are certain of the feeling they have inspired. Claude and you are very excellent friends, and have been so from childhood."

"Yes, excellent friends," said Helen, with marked emphasis.

"Then remain so, my love."

"It is all I wish," said Helen.

"And all he wishes for the present," said Lady Augusta.

"Claude is the last person to force his deeper feelings upon any one, even if he have them; a point which I don't pretend to decide."

"Mamma! mamma!" and Helen leaned her head upon her hands, and her tone was agitated: "you worry me. You don't intend it; but if you would only let me go my own way."

"And make yourself and Claude miserable," said Lady Augusta.

"If it be as you say, he must be miserable, at least for a time," said Helen.

"My love, you are talking of what you don't understand. Leave things to take their natural course, and all will go right; but don't pretend dislike."

"I wish only to show indifference," said Helen.

"And why, my love? If Claude cares for you, he will tell you so in spite of your indifference; if he does not, it is unnecessary to make such a show of it. I could have wished ——" Lady Augusta sighed; "but it is not well to indulge hope. Your dear father too!" ——

"Papa is too good and kind ever to desire any thing but my happiness," said Helen.

"True, my love, most true!" Lady Augusta spoke eagerly; "but you must allow us both to form our opinion of that which is the most likely to promote it. Claude Egerton has no rival in your father's estimation. He is in every way superior: his talents, — his fortune, — his position" ——

"Mamma! please" — Helen seized Lady Augusta's hand; "I can't bear to hear it talked of so. He has never said any thing to me; he does not care for me."

"Possibly not," said Lady Augusta, coldly.

"He is not in a mood to care for any one now," added Helen; "his heart is in his politics."

"It may be; or it may be open to other attractions; your cousin Susan, for instance. She would make him an excellent wife."

A momentary cloud passed over Helen's face. She said in a low voice, "Susan is worthy of him; I am not."

"He would improve any woman," said Lady Augusta. "With his high tone, his conscientiousness, his talents, he would elevate her mind, support her, give her interest in life."

Helen was silent.

"And Susan might suit him in some respects," continued Lady Augusta. "She would be very domestic, she would attend to his household, and listen to him, and be very obedient. For higher things — the poetry of life, perhaps —— but he would learn to do without these."

"He would not be happy without them," said Helen, thoughtfully.

"Then he would accustom himself to live in unhappiness," replied Lady Augusta, bitterly; "other men have done so before him, when those who might have been all to them have refused to be so."

"I could not bear that for him," said Helen, and her voice trembled.

"It is the lot of many men," replied Lady Augusta.

Helen shuddered. "I won't think of it," she exclaimed; "it is unwomanly: he has never said any thing."

"Exactly what I desire, my love: that you should not think of it, — that you should let every thing take its course. If disappointment must come, it will be soon enough both for him and for ourselves." Lady Augusta's tone was really sad. Helen was touched by it.

"Mamma," she said, "I know, I believe you only wish for my happiness."

"I wish only that you should not throw away happiness," replied Lady Augusta, with dignity. "But, as you say, we will think no more of it. To-morrow I shall expect to see you acting your natural self again. Any other conduct will but expose you to observation, and may, indeed, excite the very suspicions which, it seems, you most dread."

Lady Augusta left the room, and, as the door closed, Helen leaned back again on the sofa, and gave way to a burst of excited and irritated feelings.

Susan, Claude Egerton's wife! The probability had never crossed her mind before. It came now with a sharp, sharp pang of jealousy. She did not care for him herself, at least she thought so. The suspicion of his love was burdensome. She fancied that if it were offered she would refuse it, but she could not give it to another. Oh, so mean that was! so lowering! Helen's generous nature revolted from such a consciousness. She tried to think of the matter coldly and reasonably, and again she repeated to herself what she had so often before said, that Lady Augusta might be deceived, and Claude's feeling for herself be only imaginary. But it would not do. His words and manner, interpreted by Lady Augusta's hints, had betrayed him. She felt that if his love were given to Susan, it would only be because she had rejected it. How earnestly she wished that the idea had never been suggested to her! They were so easy, and happy, and unrestrained until then. She had begun to look upon him as a friend who might really be of service to her: she would have gone to him in any difficulty, and rested upon his advice. And why might she not do so still? If Susan were his wife, it might be. There came the jealous pang. Helen could not bear it; and at last she ventured to dwell upon the possibility for herself. Good, noble, true, generous, clever as Claude was, might it not be casting away

her happiness? And then her father's wishes, Lady Augusta's disappointments,—those were points to be considered. Truth,—the innate, inborn truth of her character whispered that something beyond this mere acquiescence would be wanting both for Claude and for herself; and the old harassing doubt returned, and Helen's temples throbbed with pain, as she strove to stem the current of her thoughts, one moment longing to stifle them, and the next to pour them forth into any ear which would listen with sympathy; until at length, utterly worn out with contending feelings, she threw herself upon her bed, after a short and formal prayer, unthinking of the Heavenly Love ready to soothe and comfort her, if she had but turned to seek it.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE mirth of childhood could scarcely have been more mirthful in appearance than that of the breakfast party at Ivors. Helen was there, brilliant and beautiful, bearing no trace of headache or thought; and Claude was there also, self-controlled, agreeable, considerate; and Susan sat opposite to them, quiet and reflecting; and Lady Augusta was particularly gracious, under the influence of Lady Louisa Stuart's talkativeness, which took the burden of general entertainment from her, and enabled her to devote herself to science and Miss Manners; whilst Maurice, and Mr. Pearson, Sir Henry, and Mrs. Grey, all bore their parts in keeping up the flow of conversation. It would have been impossible for any stranger entering the room to guess the spirit in which each then present had entered upon the day, still less to form any opinion upon the under currents of thought passing through the various minds. Claude Egerton was too fastidious to endure for an instant the knowledge that his secret feelings were scrutinised by the general eye, although there had been something soothing to him in the half-perception of Susan's sympathy, neither could he bring himself to trust them to the light without a certainty of their being welcomed and cherished. He had suffered himself to put forth feelers, as it were, which might assist him in discovering the nature of Helen's regard for him; and the first symptoms of repulse had sent him back into himself in moody wretchedness. But that was not a state of mind which could long continue. Manly, self-disciplined, and energetic, the experience of one day's weakness was sufficient to brace his resolution. An hour had been spent

that morning in preparing himself for the conflict, and Claude appeared at the breakfast table, able to talk politically with Sir Henry, scientifically with Miss Manners,—to discuss London notorieties with Lady Louisa, and criticise Oxford dons with Mr. Pearson,—above all, able to enter into the plans for the evening's amusement with Helen, and discourse generally with the company at large upon the comparative merits of charades and tableaux vivants.

It was a conquest over self, but not greater in comparison than Helen's. Claude had disciplined himself from childhood; Helen had no idea of any thing but external restraint. Yet she too could, in compliance with Lady Augusta's suggestions, and the dictates of her own pride, throw off the uncomfortable chilling manner which had on the previous day excited such general remark, and meet Claude with an open, cheerful face, in no way encouraging to his hopes, yet, at the same time, not distressing to him from its uncourteousness.

Helen did for pride what she would have thought it hard to be called upon to do for duty. Perhaps Claude did the same. At any rate, both were self-confident, determined, the one to hide his weakness, the other to act as if she did not perceive it.

They adjourned to Helen's morning-room by common consent—Claude, Helen, Susan, Lady Louisa Stuart, Maurice, and Mr. Pearson. Lady Augusta begged to be admitted to the conference, but was informed that she must submit to be one of the ignorant and admiring audience; and too pleased to see Claude and Helen engaged in any way which would be likely to cause a mutual interest, she departed to spend the morning with Miss Manners.

"Charades or tableaux? which is it to be?" exclaimed Maurice, leaning back on Helen's sofa, and feeling prospectively tired at the unusual efforts he was to make.

"Charades," said Lady Louisa; "they give so much more scope for intellect."

"Of a very dull kind, generally," muttered Maurice.

"Not common charades," continued Lady Louisa, "but scenic, effective ones. Hundreds can be made from Shakspeare."

"We must learn our speeches, then," said Mr. Pearson, whose voice betrayed decided alarm.

"What does it signify?" exclaimed Lady Louisa. "It can never be said of an Oxford man, that he is one of those

Hard-handed men that work in Athens here,
Which never laboured in their minds till now,
And now have toiled their unbreathed memories
With this same play."

Maurice laughed. "You are in for it, my good fellow,—Hamlet,—Richard the Third,—Mark Antony: count your lines and take the shortest that you may."

"No matter for our blunders," continued Lady Louisa: "We will have a Chorus, who shall entreat our friends that they

'Still be kind,
And eke out our performance with their mind.'"

"I beg to be Chorus," exclaimed Claude. "I feel myself equal to nothing but making apologies."

"Which you are not much in the habit of doing, if I may venture upon the remark," said Helen, in a tone of ease, observed by Susan only to be an effort.

Claude turned round quickly. "Apologies are useless when the fault has not been observed. The last I made to you, if I remember rightly, were certainly thrown away; but it is not likely to be so in the present instance. I have no talent for acting of any kind, much less for Shakspeare."

"Oh! Mr. Egerton! you deceive yourself," exclaimed Lady Louisa. "The feeling for Shakspeare is innate; it is part of the English character; the very words are inspiration, and put a new soul into all men not utterly of the common herd."

"Very likely," said Claude; "but acting is a good deal a question of bodies also; and my body is stubborn; it does not understand obeying any but that poor old soul to which it has been accustomed from its infancy."

"The prompter's soul is the only one for me," said Mr. Pearson.

Lady Louisa looked annoyed. "If you will talk so absurdly," she said, "there is nothing to be done."

"We must needs convince your Ladyship out of your own oracle," said Claude.

"A play there is, my lord, some ten words long;
Which is as brief as I have known a play;
But by ten words, my lord, it is too long;
Which makes it tedious: for in all the play
There is not one word apt, one player fitted."

"Unapt words I own we cannot plead, but unfitting players we certainly may."

Lady Louisa, though soothed by hearing Shakspeare quoted, nevertheless appeared but little inclined to yield the point.

Helen tried the *via media*. "Tableaux from Shakspeare would be charming," she said; "Hermione for instance."

"But who is to be Hermione?" asked Lady Louisa, quickly.

"Jane Aubrey will do perfectly," said Helen; "she will be here soon: she is like a wax figure in complexion; and I can answer for her being still."

"Very great praise!" said Lady Louisa, satirically. "Considerable genius is doubtless required to hold your tongue and stand still."

Helen's pouting lip betrayed rising temper, and Susan ventured to interpose.

"It is scarcely a question of exhibiting genius, is it," she asked, "so much as of giving pleasure? and perhaps it may be better to attempt little and succeed, than to attempt a great deal and fail."

"No great works would ever have been begun with that principle," said Lady Louisa.

"But many very useful works would have failed if it had been disregarded," said Claude.

He spoke eagerly, and Helen's eyes were raised to his as if she would fain have asked a question. He noticed it, and drawing near her, said, "You understand. I hope. Great attempts for great objects. This is not a great object."

"No," said Helen, shortly; "but I like a high aim in every thing."

He looked pained by her manner, and Helen perceived carrying out her morning resolution, she added, kindly, "can discuss that at our leisure though; there is no time now."

"Thank you, yes, I should like it," and Claude's face brightened, but he withdrew himself from the discussion, and took book.

Helen approached Susan. "This will never do," she said under tone; "we shall spend the whole morning in useless Shakespeare won't answer, it can't: we should all break do be absurd. I will manage it." She turned and spoke "Jane Aubrey, upon consideration, is rather short for He

— we could scarcely ask Lady Louisa to take the ———— Maurice to Claude ————

performance for the support of a charitable society. She had been very much entreated, and had been obliged to yield against her will. This, of course, would be very different; a stone, a painted marble figure would do as well.

"Not quite for the story," said Susan, "which requires life, as we shall have more than one scene."

"Dead life!" said Maurice aside to Mr. Pearson; "I suppose that is why they choose her. It's a monstrous nuisance when elderly ladies forget the date of their baptismal register. Propose her for Lady Macbeth and I will say something to you."

But this was not now possible. Lady Louisa's imagination had seized upon the idea of Hermione; and Helen, only too glad to sacrifice one point, that she might gain others, was proceeding to discuss dress, attitude, arrangement of light, &c.

Claude went up to Susan. "Could we not form a little programme by ourselves?" he said. "If we have tableaux, there should be several, and there is no time to lose. Hermione's dress will not be decided for the next hour."

Susan looked at Mr. Pearson and Maurice.

"We shall do better by ourselves," said Claude. "Could you not come with me for a few minutes into the anteroom?" Susan hesitated, but moved a little away to the lower end of the apartment. "I have several in my remembrance," continued Claude: "some from Walter Scott, and from pictures; one especially, the presentation of the crown to Lady Jane Grey. Did you ever see it?"

"No, I have never seen a tableau of any kind. I have never been at a play, I know nothing about it."

"Then you will enjoy it thoroughly, if you ever do see it," said Claude.

"Yes, if it is perfect. I dread acting, it must be imperfect."

"Not with some people," said Claude, and his eye instinctively wandered to Helen. "Where there is that quick, passionate, impulsive temperament, it ceases to be acting, and becomes reality."

"Then it would be so with Helen," observed Susan, and following Claude's glance, she also turned to look with admiration upon the graceful attitude, and the animated face with which her cousin was carrying on her conversation with Lady Louisa. "I should like to see her act," she added.

"No, no," exclaimed Claude, eagerly; "you would not bear it. I could not: it would be agony to me." He checked himself in an instant, as Susan's gentle, yet keen gaze met his; and coldly

came the concluding words of the sentence, "It would be too real, and an exhibition of that kind is not fitted for a lady."

"A tableau is an exhibition also," said Susan.

"Yes, but of a different kind. It requires self-control. There is not the excitement of acting. You will see at once that it is different. Not but that it requires care too; all these things do. Will you take part in Lady Jane Grey?"

"I would rather not. I will help by making myself useful; but I don't think I should like to take any prominent part."

"Then we must have Lady Louisa," said Claude, in a tone of disappointment.

"Or Miss Aubrey. She will be here, Helen says, in time."

"Yes, but she would not do; at least, I would rather have you for the Duchess of Suffolk. Miss Aubrey is so showy."

"She understands it, I don't," said Susan. "Helen would make a charming Jane Grey."

"Yes," and Claude sighed.

"She has the expression which is required," said Susan. "I have seen her often stand as I can imagine Lady Jane to have stood, debating between what seemed positive good and doubtful evil."

"There lay the secret of the temptation, I suppose," said Claude, thoughtfully; "Poor Lady Jane! it was a fearful punishment."

"Yes, for an error only, not for a sin," observed Susan.

"Fearful because we see and realise it," continued Claude. "Yet I often think how terrible a history would be revealed if we could learn the secrets of the punishments we don't see. But," —and he started,— "this moralising won't help us. I don't know why I always do moralise with you, Miss Graham."

"It is my fault," said Susan, simply. "I get into a grave way of looking at things, and then it comes out naturally. But I don't like it in other people. Helen's spirits always delight me."

"There is a great deal in feeling the tone of mind of the person you are conversing with," said Claude; "one puts out a sober thought so cautiously with some people."

"And it is withdrawn so soon when it is not welcomed," said Susan.

Claude smiled. "I should have thought you meant that satirically," he said, "if it were in your nature to be satirical. That habit of withdrawing my thoughts is one which I am often accused of. It is instinct only; I do it before I am aware: but, oh! the rest of finding that one can venture to say every thing freely."

"Yes," said Susan; "that one can trust to be understood."

Claude looked at her earnestly, and replied in a grave, rather low tone. "Is it presumption to say, that I fancy I should never be afraid of speaking freely to you?"

A sudden, but faint tinge spread itself over Susan's face, succeeded by paleness; yet the transient sign of emotion was gone, as she followed the direction of Claude's eye, and saw it rest upon Helen. She made no direct reply, but merely said, "I will break up the council; we have no time to lose;" and going at once to Helen, she begged her, if the arrangements for Hermione were settled, to join Mr. Egerton and herself in sketching out another tableau.

"Alas, poor Helena!" whispered Lady Louisa to Maurice, as Susan, followed by Helen, went back to the spot where Claude was standing.

" 'For ere Demetrius looked on Hermia's eyne,
He hailed down oaths that he was only mine.' "

Maurice stared, not comprehending; and thinking that he had been asked where the quotation was to be found, repeated it aloud.

"Hush! hush!" exclaimed Lady Louisa, forgetting that "hush!" is the most audible sound in the English language. It was too late to say "hush!" for one person. Lady Louisa saw the expression of Helen's face, and knew that she, at least, had both heard and understood.

It was a very busy afternoon. Mrs. Graham arrived, with Isabella and Anna, Lord Steyne and Miss Aubrey, Sir John and Lady Hume, and their daughters, and a party of friends with them. But the mysteries of the Green Room went on without interruption. Lady Augusta only interfered to insist that no stranger, except Miss Aubrey, should be admitted to them. Maurice, Claude, and Mr. Pearson must, she said, divide the gentlemen's characters amongst them. Susan still declined taking any prominent part, though she consented, if necessary, to make one of a group in the background. Her head and hands were, however, ready for every one's need. Lady Louisa would fain have engrossed her entirely, finding the difficulties of Hermione's dress likely to increase rather than diminish; but Susan had a great deal of quiet determination, and a large amount of common sense; and even in preparing a tableau vivant, she found them useful. Lady Louisa was assisted as much as was necessary, but Susan would never be a slave to any person's whims, and escaped from her again and again, to consult with Claude and Helen about other scenes, or assist Maurice and Mr. Pearson in prepar-

ing the room, which was to be used in the evening. Miss Aubrey, a pretty, fashionable girl, accustomed to universal homage, was too grand to show much interest in the homely details. She sat apart and put forth her opinion, and confident of her own powers, was willing to undertake whatever might be assigned her; Lady Louisa gave directions, but the labour was left to others, and when Susan and Lady Louisa were at work in one room, Helen and Claude were most frequently engaged in another. Whether Helen had any thoughts beyond those of the evening's entertainment, it would have been difficult to say. She was quieter, less impulsive than was her wont, and seemed unwilling to enter upon any topics of conversation, except those connected with the business of the moment. That had been her manner ever since Maurice's unfortunately loud quotation; but she was not short or ungracious to Claude, only a little stiff and silent, if Susan happened to come into the room, and enter into conversation with him. Something seemed lying at the bottom of her heart, which she would not allow to rise to the surface, but which was an oppression. If it were jealousy, she had little cause for it. Claude's morning resolution of indifference was severely put to the test by the experience of the afternoon. Helen had never appeared to greater advantage. Her freedom from vanity and the littleness of a woman's character was clear. There was no attempt at rivalry nor wish for admiration. She consented to be Lady Jane Grey in one tableau with as much simplicity as to be a female attendant in another. There was evidently not the slightest thought of exhibition, and perhaps scarcely enough interest to enable her to do her part thoroughly. Lady Louisa was the head manager; Miss Aubrey the queen, whose fiat was law; Susan the useful, cheerful assistant; but Helen was,—to herself at least,—nobody, and as such more attractive in Claude's eyes than if he had seen her electrifying an audience by the most perfect display of genius.

Yet he could not understand it. It was unlike Helen,—unlike what he should have expected from her. The check which he might have placed upon himself, if he had felt himself likely to be carried away by admiration only, was not felt to be necessary in this new phase of her character. His thoughts dwelt upon her,—his eyes followed her still, but more reverently,—with a less eager anxiety for an answering smile or a bright word; and therefore he would have said, if called upon to enter upon the task of self-examination, with a calmer and a safer feeling, How little we know of others, how much less of ourselves!

CHAPTER XXII.

SUSAN went to her mother's room, when the party dispersed to prepare for dinner. Anna and Isabella, already dressed, were there, the latter taking her sister's usual duty of lady's maid. Susan looked tired and not in very good spirits, but said that she had been enjoying herself.

"Rather more than we have," said Anna. "I thought the afternoon would never come to an end. That intolerable Miss Manners! she has been trying her German metaphysics upon me, though I told her I knew nothing about them, and could only read Schiller with the help of a dictionary."

"One feels so solitary in these great houses, with strange new people," said Isabella. "It is so long before one can fit in. Indeed, I never do."

"Isabella is always afraid of not speaking, or looking, or moving rightly," said Anna. "I tell her it is great nonsense, that no one notices her."

"Which is not much comfort," said Isabella. "That not being noticed is just the thing which makes one solitary, is n't it, mamma?"

"In a measure it is, my love. I had the feeling often when I was a girl, and comforted myself at last by resolving to look for every thing in its right place."

"Not to expect sympathy and affection from Miss Manners," said Anna.

"No; nor companionship from persons one has never seen before. It is a lesson one learns by slow degrees, in the same way as one learns to fit oneself to people, by talking to them about things they understand. There is a good deal of amusement, though very little real satisfaction to be gained from meetings of this kind."

"But one may scarcely seek for amusement only in any thing," observed Isabella. "It would make one forget right things."

"Not if one tries to be thankful for it," said Mrs. Graham. "People must meet together, or they become misanthropical, and if they do meet, they must have some light occupation, which may suit all. Besides, there is one rule for society which I always fancy is an antidote to its temptations, that of looking out for opportunities of doing little kindnesses. It acts as a continued reminder, and puts self and self-consciousness in the background;

and then one becomes easy, and there is no more trouble as to what people will say or think of one."

"That is Susan's way," said Isabella; "nothing ever puts her out."

"I am not so sure of that," replied Susan. "I could tell you tales of to-day's trials which would make you feel that we have all been put out,—all, except Helen. Oh! mamma, you don't know what she is."

Susan's tone had an accent of sadness in it, which Anna remarked, and laughed; but Susan was still grave. She stood by her mother, without speaking; watching, whilst Isabella arranged her lace scarf.

"You will be late, Susan," said Anna; "let me come and help you; that fine Mademoiselle Annette of Helen's will never be with you in time."

"I never trust to Annette," said Susan; "the housemaid does just as well; but, mamma, is it so late? I can dress very quickly."

"You want a little talk with me," said Mrs. Graham.

"Yes, if I could have it. I am sure there will be time."

"Dress first, and talk afterwards; that will be the safe thing. So run away now."

"But, dear mamma——"

"Run away, my child, and I will come to you. Won't that do? Isabella, love, find my gloves and the brooch."

Susan and Anna departed, and Isabella, alone with her mother, and always in good spirits when she was useful, confessed that, after all, she liked staying at Ivors; she liked staying any where with mamma; an observation confirmed by a kiss, and an assertion that the Admiral was quite right, and neither Helen, nor Miss Aubrey, nor any of them could be half as nice-looking.

Mrs. Graham went to Susan's room as she had promised, sent Anna away, seated herself by the fire, in the arm-chair, and said, "Now, Susan dear, for the little talk; it must be a very short one."

Susan left the final adjustment of the rose in her hair, and, turning to her mother, said, "Short, must it be? If we were only not going down to dinner! Mamma, I don't know what I want to say."

"Say something, love. You only require a beginning."

"Well, then! Mamma, does it ever do,—is it—I am so puzzled——" and she drew near, and knelt by Mrs. Graham's chair.

"Go on, dear child! I shall understand."

"Is it wrong to try and make people comprehend each other? or *is it better not to worry about it, and let them go their own way?*"

"Mr. Egerton and Helen?" asked Mrs. Graham.

"How quick you are in guessing! I can't make it out. I don't know whether they care for each other. Mamma, I don't want Mr. Egerton to be unhappy." Susan's voice shook a very little. "The other day I thought he did n't feel enough for Helen; now, I am afraid, she does n't feel enough for him."

"She must have time," said Mrs. Graham. "No interference will be good, if that is what you mean."

"Not interference on my part; oh, no! of course not. But I long—if women could only speak out sometimes—would n't it be a comfort? I do so long to tell him that I am sorry for him."

"He might n't thank you for that, my love."

"He would," said Susan, earnestly; "he likes sympathy: he told me"—and she blushed a little—"that he could talk quite freely to me."

Mrs. Graham's countenance changed. She said quietly, "You must have become very confidential for him to have said that."

"Not exactly; only on the verge. If we had gone on a little further—and if we had been alone—we might have been;—except that Mr. Egerton would never tell what he feels to any one."

"And you suspect he thinks a great deal about Helen, then, do you?" inquired Mrs. Graham.

"Yes, a great deal, and I am afraid more than she thinks about him. Yet she respects him, and people praise him, and Lady Augusta—Mamma, I told you what happened yesterday morning,—I saw directly what she wished; and I see what every one else thinks and wishes. Miss Manners and Lady Louisa Stuart seem to take things for granted in a strange kind of way, and I know that Helen sees it; her manner to Mr. Egerton becomes so odd every now and then. It is as if she were being driven on, and only half liked it. Oh, mamma, can't you see her, and talk to her?"

"Impossible. How can I interfere to prevent what every one knows Lady Augusta has set her heart upon for years?" said Mrs. Graham.

"Prevent. Did I say any thing about preventing?" asked Susan, hurriedly, whilst the colour faded from her cheek.

"You implied it, my love."

"Mamma! I did n't mean it." Susan's eyes filled with tears, and she grasped the arm of her mother's chair. "I want them to be happy. Dear mamma, you are quite sure I do;" and she looked fixedly in her mother's face.

"Quite, quite sure." Mrs. Graham's voice was a little wanting in firmness, but she went on calmly. "I understand you tho-

roughly, my child. If you were certain that Helen would love Mr. Egerton as he deserves to be loved, you would be satisfied."

Susan did not say yes. She leaned her head against her mother's shoulder, and murmured: "I would cut off my right hand to make them happy;" and Mrs. Graham replied: "Leave them to God, my child, and pray for them, that puts all things right."

At that moment the second dinner-bell rang.

Helen also had a few minutes' conversation with Lady Augusta about the same time, but it was not sought on her part. Lady Augusta came to her whilst she was dressing, sent Annette away, and insisted upon fastening Helen's dress herself. Helen disliked this exceedingly. She was fanciful about her toilette,—not vain,—but she chose to have every thing done according to her own peculiar fashion; and if it had been a case of serious necessity, could scarcely have been prevailed upon to allow any one but Annette to wait upon her. Lady Augusta's offer, therefore, was received coldly, if only for that reason; but Helen had besides an instinctive shrinking at all times from private conversations with her step-mother. In public they suited fairly well; Lady Augusta's knowledge of the world and acquired tact enabled her generally to do and say the right things at the right time, and in the right way; but the moment restraint was over, she was like the repelling pole of the magnet to Helen. Truth was at the root of one character, falsehood at the root of the other. Thoughtlessness, irritability, inconsistencies, even serious defects, might be built upon truth; suavity of manner, kind actions, strict propriety, even the appearance of religion, might be built upon falsehood; but they were not the less innately and intrinsically abhorrent to each other, and Helen felt it to her heart's core.

The conversation now was little more than a repetition of that which had passed on the preceding evening, except that Lady Augusta expressed herself well satisfied with Helen's conduct during the day. Hints were again made of Claude's supposed preference for Susan, which Lady Louisa Stuart was said to have remarked; and upon this ground, Helen was urged to feel quite at her ease, although Lady Augusta professed herself to have secret reasons for differing from Lady Louisa.

Helen was, in fact, completely mystified; but Lady Augusta's object was gained. The state of Claude's feelings was made a topic of paramount interest. Helen's attention was fully directed to him? her thoughts were not suffered to wander into other channels; and the quickening sting of incipient jealousy was

added to keep up the latent spark, which it was hoped would soon be developed into a flame.

As Lady Augusta could have prophesied, when she was gone, Helen thought and thought, — went over the same ground as on the night before, — questioned her own heart, dwelt upon Claude's goodness, hated Lady Louisa Stuart for her suggestions, quarrelled with herself for caring for them; and, at length, ringing for Annette, finished dressing very hastily, and went down stairs in an uneasy frame of mind, well suited to represent the shadow of coming sorrow — upon the face of Jane Grey.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DINNER was ended, and coffee taken into the library; the drawing-room and ante-room having been given up for the actors in the tableaux. Interest and excitement were increasing, especially behind the scenes, where Lady Louisa Stuart, in an agony of arrangement, was ordering and suggesting, moving lights, criticising attitudes, insisting upon her own plan for the programme of proceedings, and quoting Shakespeare to the confusion of her hearers and the destruction of prosaic sense. Hermione was to be the last scene, Lady Louisa thought, though she did not say, that it was best to create the greatest sensation at the end. Helen would make a very good Perdita; Miss Aubrey condescended to take the part of Paulina. The gentlemen characters were easily distributed amongst Maurice, Claude, and Mr. Pearson. Lady Louisa dwelt so long upon the plans for this scene, that the two which were immediately to precede it had but a short rehearsal. Queen Elizabeth and Amy Robsart, in Kenilworth, and Rebecca and Rowena, in *Ivanhoe*, were, however, more easily represented; since both Lady Louisa and Miss Aubrey had seen and enacted the characters several times. Lady Louisa, indeed, was so fully convinced of her own capabilities, that it was with difficulty she was persuaded to relinquish the character of Rebecca to Helen. The colour of the hair she allowed was against her, but age did not seem to enter into her consideration, except from the often repeated remark, that in a tableau nothing signified but the lights, the dress, and the attitudes; faces were nothing.

The only remaining scene of importance was the presentation of the crown to Lady Jane Grey. Lady Louisa had never taken

part in it; she did not know how to arrange it, and the chief management was left to Claude. But then he was to be one of the actors, and could not judge of his own appearance; that was a great difficulty, and much consultation and many changes took place in consequence. Miss Aubrey was to represent the Duchess of Suffolk; Helen, Lady Jane; Maurice and Claude, the two noblemen kneeling before her with the crown. If Lady Louisa would have acted as critic and director and placed them all in their right positions, the matter would soon have been settled; but annoyed that Miss Aubrey should represent the duchess instead of herself, Lady Louisa chose to withdraw at the very moment when she was most wanted, and excusing herself by saying that she was nearly worn out, and that it was Mr. Egerton's scene, she retired to the drawing-room and coffee.

"The consequence of having to deal with ladies who wish to be thought young," exclaimed Maurice. "Her ladyship would have been quite competent to give a judgment upon all points, if we had offered her the part of Jane Grey."

"She is very welcome to it," said Helen, languidly, and she sat down, and gazed despairingly upon the untidy room, and the scattered lights which must so speedily be put into order for exhibition.

Susan began to clear away all unnecessary articles, and Mr. Pearson assisted her.

"Susan, you must be the spectator," said Maurice. "You will be able to tell, if it is all right."

"I will be any thing that I am wished to be," replied Susan; "but I know nothing about it. Why not make Mr. Pearson take Mr. Egerton's character for a minute; and then he can go into the next room himself and judge?"

"A stiff collar and tail coat!" exclaimed Mr. Pearson, doubtfully.

Maurice clapped him on the shoulder. "My good fellow! console yourself. If you were wrapped in a sack no one would notice you."

"I am not so certain of that," said Helen; "the sack would be awkward in the presence of Lady Jane Grey, and I don't know that the tail coat will be much better; as a general rule, though, there is certainly nothing more annihilating to personal vanity than a tableau. One's individual self is so entirely lost in the character one represents."

"It may be so with some persons," observed Claude to Susan, in a low tone; "it is not so with all."

"One must be free from vanity, I should think, at other times," said Susan, "if one wishes to be free from it in acting; but Helen was never vain."

Claude made no reply. He stood for a few seconds silent; looking at Helen, then again addressing Susan, he said suddenly: "Will you come? we will criticise the picture together."

They went into the drawing-room. The curtain was lowered; only the flickering of the fire gave light in the room.

Susan longed to speak, but dared not. It was as though she had penetrated into Claude's heart, and could feel what he was feeling. She heard him sigh, and thought she would make a remark, but the words would not come, and she only stirred the fire and made a blaze, which was precisely the very thing she ought not to have done.

"Now then!" was heard from behind the scenes, and the curtain drew up.

Mr. Pearson had declined exhibiting himself in his tail coat, and Maurice alone knelt with the crown before Helen; Miss Aubrey as the Duchess was in the background. Claude had been standing close to Susan; he made two hasty steps forward and paused. Susan saw him put his hand over his eyes.

The actors waited for the criticism.

"Beautiful!" said Susan timidly; but her admiration met with no response.

The figures slightly breathed, and the curtain fell. Claude started.

"Will it do?" asked Susan.

He was gone. She was left to answer her own question.

Mr. Pearson joined her; then followed a few criticising remarks—short consultations,—and a final arrangement of proceedings. Inquiries were made for Claude, and some abuse was lavished upon him by Maurice for his disappearance, but there was no time to be lost. In about twenty minutes more the spectators were to assemble, and a fresh rehearsal of the scene was out of the question.

Miss Aubrey, Maurice, and Mr. Pearson, adjourned for a few minutes to another room for coffee. Helen and Susan remained behind. Chairs had been removed from the apartment, and Helen seated herself on a low stool leaning against the wall. She drew a long breath and said, "It is horrible; it is being Lady Jane. Susan, how should one have acted?"

"As she did," replied Susan. "So young it could not have been otherwise."

"Yet the responsibility was her own," said Helen.

"Not all; not the largest share: that belonged to her advisers."

"That might excuse, but it did not save her from punishment," observed Helen.

"She was misled," said Susan; "they used false, subtle arguments."

"But if they thought them true," continued Helen, "where lay the guilt then?" She leaned her head upon her hand. "It is very perplexing."

"Happily it is not likely to be our trial," said Susan, lightly.

"No;" but Helen seemed wrapped in thought. Presently she said: "She must have thought they knew better than herself what was right. Those who look on often do."

"Yes," said Susan, "very often."

"But then they were interested," continued Helen, musingly.

"Oh, Susan! where shall one find in life a disinterested adviser."

"In one's own heart, if it is kept pure," said Susan. Helen heaved a deep sigh. It was echoed by some one at her side. She turned, and saw Claude. The light fell on his face: it looked stern and worn. She asked him if he was ill, and he answered quickly, "No;" but immediately afterwards sat down in silence.

Restraint seemed stealing over them. Susan tried to break through it, and said they had been moralising again about Lady Jane Grey.

He smiled gravely, and answered, in a tone of indifference, that hers was a history open to much discussion. For himself, he looked only at her youth, and could see no fault.

"But that of obedience," said Susan. "The crown could have been no temptation."

"No," replied Claude. "She was too saintly for ambition."

"Or for any earthly temptation," said Susan, "unless——" she stopped.

"Unless what?" asked Helen.

"Unless it might have been love," replied Susan, quietly, "and that she already possessed. Shall I bring you some coffee, Helen? I am going to fetch some for myself;" and she rose and left the room.

Helen stood up as if about to follow, but she was stopped by Claude.

"Helen!" he said, and his voice was low and tremulous, "Is Miss Graham right?"

"I don't know: I don't understand." Helen spoke in a frightened tone.

"Would the temptation have been greater if it had been, not the crown of a kingdom, but that of love which was proffered for Jane Grey's acceptance."

Helen heard the beating of her own heart, but she answered calmly, "If it had been real love, the love which we know her husband felt for her, and which she returned, I suppose it would have been a much greater temptation."

"But if it had been offered by one whom, till then, she had little thought of," continued Claude, "if it had been a love almost without hope,—though intense, so that all the energy and power of life hung upon it,—would it have been at once rejected?"

"It might have been her duty to reject it," replied Helen, whilst her voice shook; "no affection can be accepted which is not reciprocated."

Claude would have taken her hand, but she withdrew it. "Helen! Helen!" he exclaimed, "listen to me but for one moment. You know what I would say,—you must have seen and understood. Only tell me that I need not despair."

"This is not the time," replied Helen, hurriedly. "I can't talk to you now. Indeed, Claude, you must leave me."

The hesitation of her voice gave him confidence. "Yes, I know," he said, "but I could not wait; it was agony. I ask only for hope."

"You would be miserable," was the reply.

"Miserable only in being parted from you. Helen, dearest, save me from that anguish, and life can have no other trial."

"Claude, it is ignorance, blindness; you seek your own wretchedness," replied Helen. "I cannot give you what you require. Far greater love than mine would be needed to satisfy you."

"But there is love," he exclaimed. "Repeat it, Helen; in pity, say it once more."

She paused.

"Not love like mine," he continued; "that cannot be; earth has none so true, so fervent. Yet let it be but the germ of that love which you can give, and I will guard and cherish it with unutterable thankfulness."

"You deceive yourself, Claude," said Helen, and her voice sounded changed and harsh. "I am unworthy of you. Nay, let me speak," as he would fain have interrupted her. "If I could give you the love you ask for, it would not make you happy. Your wife should be earnest, unchangeable. For me, God knows I am weak and feeble as the winds. I cannot trust myself,—even now I cannot. I feel only that I would tell you the truth."

"Let it be a million times the truth," he exclaimed passionately, "can it change love?—and, Helen, am not I also weak?"

"Not as I am,—not as I am. You know nothing of me."

"God knows us all," he replied, solemnly; "we will trust ourselves to Him, to make us both more worthy of each other. Yes? It is, yes?"

"Claude! Helen! Susan! what can you be doing? don't you hear? they are coming." Maurice entered the room in a state of the greatest excitement; Lady Louisa, Miss Aubrey, and Mr. Pearson followed. Susan also glided in unperceived; and in the hurry of the moment, no one remarked that she had not been there before. She gave one glance at Helen, and went up to her chair, and, standing before it, said, "We shall be ready directly. Helen, come with me; your dress is wrong. Maurice, please clear the room. Mr. Egerton, will you be kind enough to look at the lights?" Claude moved away mechanically.

Voices were heard in the drawing-room; the party stumbling in in the dark, and trying to find seats by the firelight. Then came complaints of delay; why did not the curtain draw up? Lady Louisa, behind the scenes was in a tremour of nervous impatience; every thing she was sure was wrong; no one had done any thing since she went away; but it was always the case, unless she took care of every detail herself. And where was Helen? and what was Mr. Egerton doing? He was placing the lights quite wrong. She sent Maurice and Mr. Pearson to take the office from him; but he would not be interfered with; he seemed bent upon occupation.

"We are tired of waiting," called out Sir Henry, from behind the curtain.

Lady Louisa rushed into the apartment used as a dressing-room. She found Helen lying on a sofa; Susan by her side, with a glass of water in her hand.

"What! faint? how unfortunate! what shall we do? I shall be obliged to be Lady Jane myself."

Helen sat up, looking very ghastly. "Thank you; but I am not faint, not at all; only tired. I am ready." She rose from the sofa.

Susan offered her arm, for Helen's step tottered.

"She is faint," said Lady Louisa; "you had better wait, Helen. We can change dresses directly."

"They would not fit," said Susan.

And Helen exclaimed, "Impossible!" and withdrawing her arm from Susan walked on alone.

The impatience of the spectators, in the meantime, was becoming more evident. Sir Henry threatened to come himself behind the scenes; he was sure they wanted help. Lady Augusta, with greater tact, endeavoured to divert general attention by conversation; Mrs. Graham assisted her; and for a few minutes they succeeded in lulling expectation, and making people forget that they were sitting in a dark room, with nothing to do.

Then the murmurs rose again. "It really was too bad to have brought them in so soon! It would be better to go back." But no—a tinkling bell rang, and the curtain rose.

They were there, vivid as in life, yet still, fixed, breathless, as though the spell of magic, at one touch, had converted them into stone: the two noblemen, with their gorgeous crimson doublets, stiff collars and silken hose, kneeling and supporting between them the royal crown of England; and the mother anxious, grave, standing behind the chair, from which her child had just risen, and looking on them with an eye which would fain pierce their hearts, and read the fidelity or the faithlessness inscribed on them; and the fair young wife, so young, that she seemed even yet

"Standing with reluctant feet,
Where the brook and river meet,—
Womanhood and childhood fleet;"

and gazing—what was there in that gaze—so marvellous in its intensity—so absorbing in its breathless thoughtfulness?

Claude knew,—Claude, as he knelt before her in his impassioned agony of suspense.

The curtain fell, and Helen, exhausted, sank into the chair. Claude rose hastily to support her; and as her hand was clasped in his, there was a silent pressure, which needed no words to tell that her choice was made.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"FRANCES, my dear, is there mischief in that note?" The Admiral asked the question of Mrs. Graham, who had just received a note from Ivors. She had returned to the Lodge, bringing Susan with her, as well as Isabella and Anna. "They are n't wishing you to go back again to their follies, are they?" he added querulously.

"There would be a great deal to be seen in the house if filled with new visitors," said the Admiral. "Gay London people, of course, will be there, and suppose they have more pranks going on,—dancing and such mummeries." "I believe, before long," replied Mrs. B. "There is to be a dance, I believe, nothing so pretty as the tableaux d'opéra. I can't help wishing, my dear sir, that they had the Admiral. 'It'—"

"There is to be a dance," said the Admiral. "It's Graham; but they will have nothing to do with it. I can't help wishing, if the evening before last. I can't help wishing, that you had been there."

"Right things in their right places," said the Admiral. "It's a great thing to learn in this world. The only tableau I shall ever be fit to take part in will be one where it will be no trouble to hold one's breath, for there will be none to hold."

"I shall be glad to hear it," said the Admiral, his quick eye following him. "Indeed."

"There's mischief in it," said the Admiral, his quick eyes catching Mrs. Graham's.

"Out with it, if I am to hear it." Indeed, I was lowering Mrs. Graham's.

"replied Mrs. Graham. "It may not be mischief,"

"don't see why one should think it likely."

"He has done it," said the Admiral, sternly.

"put the note into his hand. It was from Lady

"My dear Mrs. Graham,—Knowing how fully you participate in our dear Helen's joys and sorrows, I cannot delay acquainting you with the eventful circumstance which has taken place. Claude has confessed his love, and it is accepted. —"

The Admiral tossed the note to the further end of the room
 "Confessed his love!—confessed his folly!—his intoler-
 egreious folly! Oh, Frances! Frances!" The poor old
 rested his head upon his hand, and groaned in the bitter
 his disappointment. Mrs. Graham sat down beside him, &
 did not speak to him. He went on murmuring to him-
 self "He deceived me! he told me there was no fear! And I
 him! He has thrown himself away! She'll ruin him! I
 spend all his money! A gay whirligig! Oh, Frances! Fran-
 ces!" and down his cheeks.

He would not read to the end of the note until Mrs. Graham remarked that, from what Lady Augusta said, the result must have been as unlooked-for by her as by any one. Then, with a kind of surly curiosity, the Admiral went on mumbling over the words, and commenting upon them :—

“The affair has been a surprise to us all. (Surprise! when she’s been planning it for years. What falsehoods women will tell!) I find that the *dénouement* (pshaw! why does n’t she write English?) took place on the night of the tableaux; but Helen said nothing to her father or to me till yesterday, after you and the dear girls had left us. She was, of course, quite certain of our consent (of course when it was given beforehand). It would be impossible, indeed, to find any one more worthy of our darling child than Claude, whom we have known and valued for so many years. His moral worth and intrinsic excellence will assure to our sweet Helen that support and guidance which her gentle, feminine nature so much requires. As my friend Miss Manners says (Miss Manners! what, is she there still? No wonder poor Claude was taken in with two of them), her inward being will be nurtured by communion with his high-souled spirituality, and will develop itself more perfectly, and with a deeper and fuller appreciation of life than could possibly have been the case if she had been tempted to bestow her affections upon a less elevated object. Assured of your congratulating sympathy,

“I remain always,

“Very sincerely yours,

“AUGUSTA CLARE.”

The Admiral read the last sentences twice, slowly, and pausing upon the words “Inward being nurtured by high-souled spirituality.” “Beyond me, that! What does it mean, Frances? Stop, here’s a postscript that may explain.”

“Of course this communication is only between yourselves, the dear Admiral, and your children; Helen so dreads vulgar gossip. I am overwhelmed with business, having to collect votes for the Orphans’ Home, the Deaf and Dumb Asylum, the Governesses’ Benevolent Institution, and the Refuge for Destitute Servants. I send catalogues and names, and shall feel most grateful for any assistance which you and the dear girls can give me. Miss Manners is my indefatigable assistant. Helen, dear child! too happy to think of any of these terrestrial objects.”

"Then she's not a bit like her stepmother," exclaimed the Admiral. "Why, the woman's drowned—over head and ears drowned in the world! Let me remember:—'inward being nurtured by high-souled spirituality;'—meaning—yes, don't attempt to explain, Frances; I understand,—Helmsley and fifteen thousand a year in the background; in the foreground, Orphan Homes—Deaf and Dumb Asylums—Institutions and Refuges,—all very prominent!—chimneys of Helmsley only seen over the roofs! Faugh! And Claude Egerton has sold himself for this!"

The Admiral sank back in his chair, and beat time on the floor with his stick. He started up again in a few moments. "What does Susan say to it all?"

"It will be no matter of surprise to her at least," replied Mrs. Graham. "She saw——" "their mutual affection" were the words which would naturally have followed, but some uncomfortable recollections rose up and stopped them.

"Well! saw what?" inquired the Admiral, sharply.

"She saw how much Claude admired Helen."

"Let him. What has admiration to do with marriage? If a man is to marry every woman he admires, he may have as many wives as a Turk. I should have thought better of Claude Egerton; I am disappointed in him; I should have thought better of him."

"Only, my dear sir, now that the deed is done."

"But it's not done,—I tell you, Frances, it's not done;—it can't and shan't be. I'll talk to the boy; I'm his guardian. He has no right to act without consulting me. He has been taken in."

Mrs. Graham only smiled.

"Don't look so, Frances; I can't bear it." The Admiral was working himself up into a passion, but another glance at Mrs. Graham checked him. "Yes, I know what you would say: it's very wrong; one has no right to vex when things are out of one's power. But it's not done: 'many a slip 'twixt the cup and lip.' She is not his wife yet, eh, Frances?"

"Indeed, dear sir, I can't hope that any thing will happen to prevent her being so. I would not wish for a better fate for Helen than to have a husband like Claude."

"Aye, for her! well, indeed! But for him?"

"Suppose we don't think about it any more just now," said Mrs. Graham. "It only frets us both."

"And it does fret you then?" The Admiral's tone was and he looked at Mrs. Graham with something of his but good-humoured expression.

"It frets me a little,—just a very little. I want to see them together, and judge for myself how far they suit."

The Admiral's manner changed. "You are an angel, Frances, which is more than I am. I don't believe you ever thought of yourself in your life. If Claude Egerton is happy, it will be more, ten thousand times, than he deserves."

Mrs. Graham's countenance showed grave and anxious thought; and, seeing that the first burst of the Admiral's vexation was for the moment allayed, she left him to seek for Susan.

CHAPTER XXV.

SUSAN was in the drawing-room with her sisters. They were busy, as they would have been at home; but the bachelor's state apartment, cold and neat, was very different from the bright little working-room at Wingfield Court. That, perhaps, gave a feeling of discomfort to the party; for there was unquestionably an absence of the cheerful interest in what they were doing which made all home pursuits agreeable. Isabella was on the verge of a mood, and striving against it so visibly that others had the sensation of striving also. One mind out of sorts affects others, as it were, by magnetic influence. It is impossible to be insensible to it. Isabella, with all her love for her mother and sisters, caused them more uncomfortable hours than she would have been at all willing to acknowledge. Because the moods were not noticed, she supposed they were not felt.

Mrs. Graham, unfortunately for her own comfort, was as quickly alive to changes in the moral atmosphere as some invalids are to those in the physical. She could see by the very way in which Isabella held, but did not use, the pencil, with which she had been drawing from a small marble bust of Shakspeare, that something was wrong.

"Mamma, we have been wanting you very much," said Anna, as her mother entered the room. "We think we are rather dull after Ivors."

"I don't think so," said Isabella; "I like this a great deal better than Ivors."

"Because you never like any thing," said Anna, a little pettishly. "Mamma, will Lady Augusta ask us to the dance they are going to give?"

"Most likely, my love; but I am afraid you are growing dissipated."

"Dear mamma, no! If we were at home, I should not care; but here, you know, it is what Charlie calls slow."

"Charlie comes, we hope, the day after to-morrow," said Mrs. Graham, "and then we must be at home. But Anna, love, I must have you learn to bear dulness."

"I can't, dear mamma; I never could. It gives me a creeping sensation down to the tips of my fingers; and at last I feel as if I must get up and walk to get rid of it. I began just now, and Isabella didn't like it. I didn't mean to worry you, Bella dear;" and Anna started up and gave her sister a kiss, and then laughed heartily. "I beg your pardon, and I am so sorry! but do look, mamma,—an exemplification of an inch in a man's nose!" She pointed to an unfortunate stroke, which, by shaking the table in her walk, she had caused poor Isabella to make.

"Very provoking!" said Mrs. Graham, soothingly, to Isabella, who immediately began to rub the line, murmuring, at the same time, that the drawing was spoilt.

Anna looked really vexed now, and said again that she was very sorry, and Isabella made an effort to assure her that it did not signify; but, although she could overcome the temporary annoyance, it was less easy to change the tone of feeling which had caused it to be so much felt, and Isabella continued her drawing in silence.

All this time Susan had been engaged in writing,—nothing, apparently, very interesting: she seemed to be copying accounts. She looked up and smiled, when her mother asked her what she was so intent upon. Perhaps it was the quick instinct of affection which made Mrs. Graham think that the smile had lost something of its brightness; for the answer was very cheerful. "I am finishing all the little ends of business which I never have time to finish at home, dear mamma; and I want to work hard to-day, because then I shall be ready for Charlie on Monday."

"I thought you might come to my room for a few minutes," said Mrs. Graham: "I want you there."

Susan rose instantly. "Anna, I think, if you would be kind enough, you might finish what I am doing; if you have nothing else to do, that is; and Bella, when I come back, shall we go on with the reading?" Anna's response was hearty, and before Susan had reached the room, she was busy at her work.

"Yes, if you like it," and continued to draw, with a matter of indifference.

"Poor child!" said Mrs. Graham, with a sigh, as she closed the door behind them. "How long has this mood been coming on?"

"Only this morning," replied Susan. "She was as bright as possible yesterday. I really don't know what caused it. It was all nonsense about Anna and the drawing. She was only annoyed for the moment. It is something in her own mind, I am sure."

"Dissatisfaction with herself, I dare say," replied Mrs. Graham. "A great many of us make others suffer when our consciences are uncomfortable. But, Susan, dear, you must work at her; you can do more than I do. You are with her more constantly, and she shows herself more as she really is when only you and Anna are present."

"She wants to be humoured so sadly," replied Susan; "and that is one of the things which perplexes me; whether it is right, I mean. About the reading; it really is inconvenient to me; but I knew it was the only thing which could put her right, and so I proposed it."

"She requires to be treated as an invalid," replied Mrs. Graham,—"and she is so, I am sure. There is a great deal that is physical in this morbidness; and for other remedies I see none, outward at least, but occupation. She will be better again when she goes home."

"And I don't think it is good to notice the moods," continued Susan.

"It is very bad. Be as cheerful as you can, and take it for granted that she is cheerful too: only put her in the way of employing herself, and don't cross her unnecessarily. All that soothing and petting helps matters for a time, but it increases the evil in the end. It seems a hard thing to say, but vanity and selfishness are often at the bottom of these uncomfortable feelings."

"I wish very much sometimes that she was married," said Susan.

"She is rather young for that wish," replied Mrs. Graham; "and marriage might increase the evil tenfold. If her husband did not devote himself to her, she would think his affection was going from her, and make herself miserable."

"She would be very exacting," observed Susan.

"Yes; and there are few men who can bear that."

"But she would have more duties," continued Susan.

"In a certain way: she has enough now, if she would only see them. But I have not much hope of permanent improvement

from these external causes. There may be more excitement and energy for a time, but life must grow vapid again, as years go on; and then the old evil will return. The spring must be in one's own heart, if it is ever to be kept in motion. Religion as a principle of love, and not merely of duty, is, I am convinced, the only remedy; and for that we must pray and wait."

They had reached Mrs. Graham's room. Susan appeared thoughtful and uneasy. Her sister's moods were, perhaps, more trying to her than to any one else in the family. She saw more of them than her mother, and had not the buoyancy of temperament which enabled Anna to throw off the oppression caused by them.

Mrs. Graham regarded her with anxiety. "You are tired, my child; and these worries are too much for you."

"Oh! no, indeed, dear mamma." Susan's face was cheerful in an instant. "I only feel for you. It must be so disappointing after working so hard for us all for years."

"When my children were given me," said Mrs. Graham, "I made up my mind that they could never be perfect; so there is no disappointment. I try to take their imperfections as God has thought fit to send them. The disappointment is much more with myself, for not having done better with their education. Yet there again I try to rest contented, and to feel that, as I wish to do right, God will, in some way or other, work good out of my mistakes. It is a great secret of cheerfulness, Susan, to remember that one is living, not in Paradise, but in a fallen world."

"Yes," said Susan; "I feel that I am always longing to be perfect myself, and to have every one about me perfect. And, mamma, it does seem as if there were some persons very nearly so."

"I hope Helen will agree with you," said Mrs. Graham, speaking in a light tone, yet at the same time keeping her eyes anxiously fixed upon Susan's face. "It is as you thought, Susan; I have had a note from Lady Augusta, and ——"

"He is accepted," exclaimed Susan. She paused for a minute; her colour went and came with startling rapidity, and there was a nervous movement of her hand; but she continued, speaking gaily, though hurriedly, "It was the night of the tableaux, I am sure. I saw the change in Helen's manner, — only I could not ask; and all that evening he would not leave her. Lady Louisa remarked it to me. And Helen would not go back to the drawing-room when every thing was over: she went to bed. And yesterday morning I scarcely saw her; she avoided me. I felt

certain there was something on her mind. Mamma, mamma, she must be happy." Susan sat down, her elbow rested on the arm of the chair, and with one hand she tried to hide her face.

Mrs. Graham took the other hand, and smoothed it fondly. "You must not be anxious, my child. It is good for her—and"—she paused—"for him."

Susan gasped for breath, and looked at her mother doubtfully. "Mamma, are you sure?"

"Sure that Helen has the elements of a great and noble character," began Mrs. Graham.

Susan interrupted her. "Yes, yes,—noble—generous; but—it is so quick—it is like a dream."

"Yet you saw it coming," continued Mrs. Graham.

"I thought I did, but at last——" Susan did not finish the sentence; she trembled violently.

Mrs. Graham gave her some water, kissed her, and said, "You are over-tired, my love; you had better lie down."

"I think I had." Susan smiled, and then trembled again, so that she could not hold the glass.

"You shall rest here on the sofa," said Mrs. Graham; and she placed the cushions comfortably: "I am going away."

"Must you go? dear mamma!" Susan held her mother's hand. "Kiss me again; don't go. Mamma, do you love me?"

It was the touching tone of a heart searching after a sorrow not understood; and Susan leaned her head on her mother's shoulder, and found relief in tears.

Some feelings are subdued by being brought to the light and grappled with; others need rather to be crushed in the bud, so as never to be realised even by those who are their victims.

That little scene was as if it had never taken place, both with Susan and her mother. Susan appeared again in the drawing-room, after an hour's rest, read with Isabella as she had proposed, and walked in the afternoon into Wingfield, to see Kate Hope, and beg her to prolong her stay, since Mrs. Graham had been absent so much longer than she had at first intended. Susan was so equable and gentle at all times, that no one considered it strange that she said but little; and any appearance of depression was attributed to the fact of her having been over-tired at Ivors, and in consequence not feeling well.

Yet two things might have been remarkable to any person acquainted with the circumstances which had occurred; one, that Mrs. Graham in no way petted Susan, or showed any difference in manner between her and her sisters; the other, that the fact of

Helen's engagement was known to Isabella and Anna, as well as to the Admiral, and yet that it formed no topic of conversation beyond a few passing remarks.

With the Admiral Mrs. Graham was as explicit as she could be, without touching upon Susan's private feelings. She told him at once that it would be most painful to her if the least suggestion of his disappointed hopes were made to Susan; and it was as a personal favour that she entreated him not even to name the subject for the present, lest in his irritation he might be induced to betray the secret wishes which now he must himself see ought quickly to be forgotten.

The Admiral agreed as a child would have done, conscious of his own weakness, and simply trusting the counsellor whom conscience told him would be wiser and better than himself: but he chafed and fretted under the restraint, ate no dinner, complained of symptoms of gout, and went to bed early, without asking for Isabella and Anna, and only seeing Susan for a minute, when he held her hand in both his, and blessed her, and sent her away with a hasty gesture, as though he could not bear to look at her.

With her children Mrs. Graham needed only one argument. It was her wish. She did not say why or wherefore. Mr. Egerton and Helen were engaged to be married, but the fact was not generally known; and it was her request that the matter should not be talked of, even amongst themselves, for the present. The habit of early obedience made all such commands easy. A few observations were made to Susan, and received with the seemingly quiet interest which was natural; and then Isabella and Anna remembered that it was Mamma's wish they should not talk about it, and so they were silent.

Poor Susan! she knew as little the amount of suffering from which her mother's loving tact had shielded her, as she did the precipice of desolation and agony upon which she had been standing. She fancied herself envious, blamed and watched herself, checked every doubtful thought of Helen, tried to take pleasure in contemplating her happiness, and in the struggle against self, found, if not rest, at least that blessing of a conscience at peace, which enabled her to kneel before God, and trust the unknown and unfathomed grief to Him, certain that He could understand and heal it.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Ivors was looking brilliantly cheerful under the influence of a south-east wind, and a clear sunshiny sky; but it was January still, treacherous, though fair. The breeze was sharp, as it was met at the angle of the colonnade; and Helen wrapped her cloak closely around her, as she paced up and down with Claude, peeping in at the drawing-room windows when they passed in front of them, and thinking, though she did not quite like to say it, that the fire seemed very comfortable.

"You are not cold, dearest?" said Claude, regarding her anxiously, after one of these pauses. He took off the plaid which he wore, and would have put it round her.

"Oh! no, thank you; please not, dear Claude." Helen made a slight gesture of impatience. "I should be smothered under it."

"We will go in, if you like it," he continued; but the tone betrayed that he would not like it himself.

"We can take one or two more turns," said Helen, adjusting her cloak again, and shivering a little.

Claude looked distressed. "You are cold, I am quite sure, and I have brought you out against your will."

"No, indeed," and Helen smiled affectionately; "you know I always like to do what pleases you."

"But not what pleases yourself," said Claude, a little reproachfully.

"The wind is rather sharp, you must own," said Helen, in a playful tone.

"Perhaps so; but, Helen, I feel no sharp wind when you are with me."

She was silent, and he went on. "I could walk to the world's end, and be conscious of no fatigue; I could labour for years, and never know a moment's weariness; I could suffer agony, and scarcely think of it, for you."

"Yes, I know it. Oh! Claude, I am unworthy of such love." Helen's voice was sad in its self-reproach. He interrupted her eagerly.

"Helen, if you love me, you will never speak in that way. I can't bear it."

"But it is true, Claude," said Helen, gravely; "and you will one day find it so."

"Let it be," he replied, hurriedly; "I will wait till the day comes. But surely, Helen, love is a blessing of which we are all unworthy."

"Some less so than others," replied Helen. "You have lived a life of usefulness and activity, and have, as it were, purchased love."

"Not yet!" he exclaimed; "it is my dream, still to be realised. Oh! Helen, I have so often pondered upon what life might and ought to be, and shrunk back as I thought I was to encounter it alone; and now, at the very outset, God has granted me the one boon which I scarcely dared to ask,—a heart to share the burden with my own,—a precious love to make all labour light."

"Only it will disappoint you," said Helen, quickly.

He spoke impatiently: "Helen, dearest, it pains me so; why will you always return to that one point?"

"Because it is always present to me," she replied; "but I would not wish to pain you."

"Trust yourself," he replied; "it is all I ask. And, Helen, we shall soon have no leisure for such misgivings; there will be too much to do and to think of to afford time for doubt. One feels that when placing oneself in thought at the end of life, and looking back so as to see how best to fill up its outline."

"That is not my way, I am afraid," said Helen, a little petulantly. "I take the day as it comes, and don't trouble myself with the future. But then I am so young," she added, more gravely.

"Yes, you are young," he replied, tenderly; "and you have been called upon only to obey. But, Helen, dearest, I was never young, at least within my own remembrance; and I have had none to lean upon; I have shaped my own course,—that makes it so responsible."

"You have shaped it well hitherto," she replied.

"What says the wise man?" said Claude, with a smile. "'Judge no man's work until the end.' And it is only by considering the end, that I would desire mine to begin. What one shall wish to have done when one comes to die, that is the question."

Helen slightly shuddered.

"Am I too grave, dearest? Perhaps I ought not to talk so. But it is difficult to be unlike oneself." His accent showed a little disappointment.

Helen looked vexed, and said, "I would rather always hear you say what comes most naturally to you."

"Even though it may not be pleasant to yourself," he replied. "I shall be better satisfied, Helen, when you can become more selfish."

"But I do like it, — I do wish to hear. Oh! Claude, you don't understand," she exclaimed.

"Yes, indeed, indeed I do," and his manner was in an instant full of self-reproach. "Helen, darling, forgive me. It is a relief so great to talk of feelings and purposes which have been pent up for years, because there was no heart to receive them."

"A man might be better able to share them than a woman," said Helen.

"Never, never. Women have enthusiasm and earnestness of purpose, even more than men; and that is what I have longed for. With such help, I have felt that I could work for ever."

"And kill yourself in the act of working," replied Helen playfully, "as every one says you will."

"I hope not. I don't want to be irrational. But life is very short, taken at its utmost term; and there are such infinite needs, such horrible, pressing evils! They make one at times breathless with their urgency. And oh! Helen, what it will be to stand on the brink of eternity and think that life has been wasted, that even one year had been passed selfishly!"

Helen trembled, as she answered, "Not one year, but many of my life have been selfish."

"You accuse yourself, dearest, when others would see only the natural consequence of education and circumstances. But we will begin together now" — and he pressed her hand fondly; "we will seek God's blessing upon our purpose, and then set ourselves to do His work constantly, and enduringly; and thinking only" — his voice sank as he added, "It is too great happiness to realise even for a moment, that one may at last hear the words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!'"

Helen's eyes were filled with tears, but she was silent.

"The utmost!" murmured Claude, speaking to himself.

"Your utmost is greater than that of others," said Helen.

"Not greater than the utmost of the Bible," he replied: "and how much less than the utmost of the love bestowed upon us!"

Helen heaved a deep sigh. Claude thought she was unhappy, and that he had made her so. His tone and manner changed: he was anxious and caressing. Helen, instead of responding, became only very quiet, and the few words which she spoke were almost cold. Claude seemed determined not to notice it. He went on, still pouring forth the fulness of his heart; and Helen evidently,

after a time, made an effort to overcome the feeling, whatever it might be, which was oppressing her. She answered more cheerfully, and once or twice used some warmer expressions, which were eagerly received by Claude, and dwelt upon; and at length, by degrees, the cloud passed away, and the conversation became lighter, and Helen's manner more unrestrained. Yet when Claude asked if she would not like to go in, she agreed with a readiness only partially concealed by the excuse that she had been walking for nearly an hour.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CLAUDE and Helen had been engaged about three weeks: months of intimate knowledge might and ought to have been condensed into the period; but they were strangers.

Yet Helen had not intentionally misled Claude. Towards the close of that same eventful evening on which he had first declared his affection, they had held a long conversation together, in which Helen believed that she had fully and truly explained the nature of her own regard. Claude was satisfied, even more than that,—he was intensely happy. That she could return his affection in any degree, was almost beyond his hopes. He had assured her so, many times. And she was happy herself; honoured by his love, grateful for it; building upon it as upon something which was, as by a miracle, to change the whole current of her mind, and make her good without effort of her own; above all, supported by the knowledge of the full satisfaction of her father and Lady Augusta; and the assurance, which she was certain would meet her on all sides, that she had done well and wisely.

There had been no change since this in outward circumstances. Claude was as good and noble as ever; her parents were even louder in his praises than before; her own heart owned that he was worthy of all the affection which it was in the power of woman to bestow; but the momentary excitement was over,—and Helen was the creature of excitement, and as such she deceived others, and fatally deceived herself.

True, she had held a long conversation with Claude, and confessed to him, as she believed, the extent of her regard; but it was a confession made in a tumult of feeling, when the events of the evening had quickened her pulse, and the rush of excited and

gratified vanity, mingled with the jealousy excited by Lady Augusta, had disturbed both her conscience and her reason. Unconsciously she had been urged on—unconsciously stimulated to a state of feeling in itself unnatural to her; and in that state she had, obeying the truthfulness of her nature, spoken indeed of coldness and unworthiness, and fears that Claude's happiness would be sacrificed, but with an accent and manner which belied her words.

How could Claude be otherwise than satisfied? And how could Helen believe that she had deceived him? But the reaction came, and that speedily. Claude's affection was as deep as it was intense. Change was repugnant to his nature. As he loved one day, so he loved the next, and the next, at all hours, under all circumstances; and so of course he showed his love. But he did not understand Helen; perhaps he understood little of women in general. In the eagerness of his happiness he allowed himself to express his feelings to their full extent: it was the bursting of the pent-up heart, the indulgence of the yearnings which since childhood had never been satisfied; and Helen, instead of reciprocating, was overwhelmed by them. As Claude's love became warmer, hers was chilled. The very truth of her character told against him. She could not bring herself to express what at the moment she did not feel. Often jarred upon by the very tenderness of his manner, which seemed to her almost unnatural, she weighed her own words, and checked herself when she would otherwise have returned his affection. Claude was pained, and Helen was grieved; and in her sorrow, pity and self-reproach stimulated her feelings, and she was again loving and grateful, and Claude again was happy. As friends they might have been a mutual comfort and assistance to each other, and regard and respect might, by degrees, have ripened on Helen's side into a warmer and deeper feeling. But she had placed herself in a false position, and her intercourse with Claude was necessarily restrained and unreal. Most especially was this the case when he touched upon those serious subjects which were always in his own opinion of paramount importance. Before they were engaged Helen was interested in them, and believed that by discussing them her standard of right was raised, and her judgment improved. She was not aware that no small part of the charm consisted in the excitement of hearing Claude talk; that similar remarks made by a prosaic old woman would have been listened to with indifference. Of course, therefore, she believed that the same or even greater pleasure and benefit would be derived from Claude's

conversation when they were engaged; and if she had really loved him, doubtless this would have been the case. But the excited feeling which Helen, under the influence of Lady Augusta's goading suggestions, mistook for love, could not support a changeable mind like hers day after day. It had been very pleasant to hear Claude discourse upon grave matters when she was at liberty to run away from him when she was tired, or excuse herself if she was not in the humour to listen to him; but when once he had a claim upon her, his favourite topics became oppressive, and her untamed spirit fluttered like a bird in a cage, longing to escape simply because she felt herself under restraint.

Claude was perplexed and distressed by her; but he was in love with an ideal being, not with the real Helen: and whenever the unpleasant truth that his idol was imperfect forced itself upon him, he consoled himself by the same delusion which had been the means of originally exciting his affection. Helen might not be quite perfect now, but she would become so by training and care; and he—so he flattered himself—should be the instrument in God's Hands of forming her character. With this view he told her of his hopes and projects, his views of life and principles of action; discoursing to the present Helen as he would to the unreal and future one, and seizing upon every word or tone which showed interest in his feelings, as indications of that completeness of heart which he fully believed was the joy in store for him.

It was all a dream, yet sufficient for happiness if he were never to wake from it.

And Lady Augusta—it was her work. What did she know or care for all this?

Nothing. Her point was gained; Claude and Helen were engaged. She thought herself a very pattern of maternal care. She, who might have manœuvred and married Helen to the first nobleman in the land, was contented with a commoner, and had chosen Claude for his goodness. She had saved Helen from the seductive snares of fashionable life, and, after educating her in retirement and simplicity, placed her where she would hold the comparatively retired position of the wife of a country gentleman. What mother could have acted with higher principle or greater prudence?

"I have done my duty, my love," was her self-complacent ejaculation to Miss Manners. "It has been an arduous task, but I have fulfilled it. My sweet Helen's happiness is secure."

Yet "sweet Helen" herself did not seem so fully sensible of this

fact as she might have been, particularly when any allusion was made to the necessity of consenting to bring her engagement to its termination by fixing the time for her marriage. Delays of course there must be. Claude was to take his seat in parliament, and Helmsley was to be refurnished, and the interminable work with the lawyers was to be hurried through. But Claude was quite certain that every thing could be ready by Easter; and his eager yet methodical mind could not rest without some settled point to dwell upon. But Helen was variable as the winds. In her good moods she would give Claude hope, and promise to comply with whatever he might think best; but in her wilful ones it was impossible to keep her to any plan for ten minutes together; objections were raised to every thing proposed, and the moment a definite time was mentioned, a cloud came over her, and the conversation was dexterously diverted into another channel.

Helen's wayward disposition was a sufficient explanation of these changes to the world in general, and perhaps to Lady Augusta; but her father was irritated by them. His straightforward, manly character made it impossible for him to follow the intricacies of such a mind. If Helen was engaged to be married, the sooner, according to his ideas, the marriage took place the better. He disliked long engagements, he said, and had never known any good come of them. In nine cases out of ten, people grew tired of waiting, and at length tired of each other; and this opinion, backed by Lady Augusta's urgent expostulations, now and then had some weight with Helen, at least apparently. But the reluctance lay deeper than waywardness. It was founded upon truth,—felt, though scarcely understood. Helen did not love Claude as a woman ought to love the man whose wife she has promised to be; and not all the casuistry of philosophy could have availed against the honest instinct of her own heart.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BUT this was the under-current at Ivors; on the surface all was cheerfulness and excitement. Under the influence of the satisfaction caused by Helen's engagement, Lady Augusta's sympathies expanded to the world at large, as well as to her own exclusive coterie. She proposed to give a ball; Helen, who delighted in dancing, willingly seconded the idea; Sir Henry thought it might

further his political interests, and Claude, though he did not like it, yet made no open objection. A ball in a country place, and for political purposes, must include every one; and persons who had never been admitted within the precincts of Ivors, except on the occasion of a yearly morning visit, were surprised by receiving the unexpected honour of a card, requesting the pleasure of their company on Thursday evening, Feb. 17th, at nine o'clock. Many, and long, and various, were the discussions consequent upon such an unlooked-for event. Pride whispered, that if Lady Augusta did not choose to show ordinary attentions, she had no right to offer those which were extraordinary. Timidity made it doubtful whether it would be pleasant to be the guest of a person so proverbially haughty and exclusive. Indolence thought that the weather was cold, and that a seat by a warm fireside was better than a long drive on a winter's night. Prudence suggested that it would be a very expensive affair, dress being a matter of so much importance with the fashionable people who would be met at Ivors. But curiosity—the fatal inheritance which even heathens regarded as the source of all human ills—proved stronger than pride, timidity, indolence, or prudence; and, with scarcely one exception, Lady Augusta's invitations were accepted "with much pleasure."

"Not only the world, but his wife!" exclaimed Maurice, throwing down a number of notes which had just arrived. "What could be the good of inviting such a herd of savages?"

"Ask Claude," said Lady Augusta, graciously; "it is all for him."

Claude had just returned from his walk in the colonnade, and, perhaps, was not in particularly good spirits, or at the acmé of good humour. "He was sorry," he said, "to have been the cause of so much trouble; but he scarcely knew what connexion there was between himself and the ball;—indeed, he was not certain that he should be able to remain for it. He was obliged to be in London on the 19th, and possibly he might be called upon to go earlier."

"My dear Claude! impossible! we can do nothing without you!" exclaimed Lady Augusta, with a countenance full of affectionate horror at the suggestion. "We will put off the party—put it on—do any thing,—but we must have you."

"I am a very useless person at a ball," said Claude. "I only dance because I can't help myself; and I am a miserably dull partner."

"We will ask what Helen says," said Lady Augusta, smiling.
"*I never had the pleasure of dancing with Helen that I can*

remember," said Claude, rather coldly. "It was one of the complaints she used to make against me when I was a boy."

"And she will make it still," observed Lady Louisa Stuart, looking up from the table at which she was writing. "Helen delights in dancing so, that she would fain have you 'go to church in a galliard and come home in a coranto.'"

"And boast of having the 'back trick' simply as strong as any man in Illyria," said Claude, laughing. "No, I leave all such marvels to Sir Andrew Aguecheek. The only back trick I can attempt in dancing is that of backing out of it."

"I doubt," continued Lady Louisa, regarding him with an inspecting eye,—"'I did think, by the excellent constitution of thy leg, it was formed under the star of a galliard.'"

Claude looked a little impatient. "Possibly of a galliard, but certainly not of the polka."

"Oh! you don't know your own powers under such an instructress! Helen, my love!" and Lady Louisa appealed to Helen, who just then entered the room,— "your services are required as dancing-mistress. Here is Mr. Egerton playing the recreant knight, and threatening to go off to London the day before the ball, unless you undertake to teach him the polka."

"To London before the ball!" exclaimed Helen. "Have you business there, Claude?"

She did not seem particularly vexed at the idea; and Claude answered with assumed indifference, that he might have; he could not say; but the ball would go on just as well without him.

"You don't like dancing, I know," said Helen, meaning to make an excuse for him.

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed Lady Louisa; "he does not know his own mind. Augusta, you really must interfere."

"There is no cause for it, I am sure," replied Lady Augusta, in her gentlest manner; "Claude is too well aware of the value we set upon his presence to give us such a disappointment. Indeed, Claude, you should remember, Helen's pleasure would be completely gone."

Helen was silent. She might not have heard, for she was turning over the pages of a new club book.

"I don't advise Claude to remain if he can escape it," exclaimed Maurice. "Such a set of aborigines! Why it will be a complete invasion of cuckoos, turning us out of our nest."

Every one laughed. Maurice had made such a very comfortable nest for himself by means of a *chaise longue* drawn near the fire, that it was clear what had suggested the fear.

"With Claude away, and you devoted to the care of your own nest," observed Helen, "we shall be very happily situated with regard to a master of the ceremonies for the aborigines. Mamma"—and she took up the notes which Maurice had thrown down—"who are all these people?"

"Political acquaintances a good many of them, my love," replied Lady Augusta: "persons whom your father thinks it right to show some attention to, and whom it is better to ask *en masse*. They will be less in one's way, and the one evening will do for them."

"The fulfilment of Caligula's wish," said Helen. "Give them one neck, and kill them. Well, I suppose it is right. I conclude they will know how to entertain each other. Happily we shall have our own party. Maurice, have you written about the band?"

"Not yet; I shall to-day. Claude, I thought that you and I, and Helen, might ride over to Dollington this afternoon to inquire about it. There is nothing to be done in that way at Wingfield."

Claude had been standing apart all this time, with the air of a man anxious to escape, and yet not able to make up his mind to the effort. When Helen was present, it was always a difficulty to leave the room. He started as Maurice addressed him, and answered that he was not quite sure whether it would be possible; he thought there was some other engagement for the afternoon.

Lady Louisa smiled satirically. "Don't you see, Maurice, 'our graver business frowns at this levity.' The honourable member for Ramsay interest himself in ordering music for a ball! impossible!"

Claude turned to Helen. "Did we not agree to ride out to Wingfield, and call on your aunt? I should like to prove that my engagement is a true one."

"Wingfield is on the way to Dollington," said Maurice; "perhaps—the days are so short,—there will be no going further if Helen and Susan are allowed to gossip together. But, I suppose Claude,"—and he looked very malicious,— "you would not leave the young ladies to amuse each other, and go on with me, and return again." Claude glanced at Helen, and received, in reply to his unasked question, the observation, that she had a good many things to say to Susan; perhaps it might be as well.

"And after all," said Lady Louisa, "the idea is not so unsuitable, when the errand is looked upon in its true light.

'Give me some music; music, moody food
Of us that trade in love.'

Claude could bear it no longer, and made his exit; whilst Maurice laughed, and Lady Augusta murmured, "Louisa, you really are too bad."

Helen alone was grave, and, after a few moments, took the opportunity of stealing unperceived from the drawing-room, and seeking Claude where he was most likely to be found—in the library.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CLAUDE'S countenance and attitude showed that he was really vexed, if not unhappy. He did not even brighten when Helen drew near, till she went up to him, and laid her hand upon his arm; and then a smile, most touching in its gentleness and love, passed over his face, as he said, "Are you come to make Lady Louisa's peace?"

"I am come to make my own," said Helen. "Claude, I am very provoking to you."

"I expect too much," he replied, "when I feel that I cannot live happily for a single day away from you. I forget how much you have, and have always had, to interest you, independently of me."

"You know I do wish—yes, I wish heartily—that you should be here for the ball," continued Helen.

Strange! that the assurance did not satisfy him; but it was so.

"My business is no pretence," he replied, avoiding a direct reply. "I do think it may be necessary: I had letters this morning which made me fear that it might be; but I would not say any thing about them till I was certain, fearing—but I don't think I need have been under any such apprehension."

"You think I don't care," said Helen. He sighed; and Helen continued, in a tone of self-exculpation, "You have always said that you don't like dancing, and you set your face against the ball from the beginning. I don't think Mamma and I should have succeeded in it at all, because of your dislike, if it had not been for Papa's fancy of giving an entertainment to—" she stopped.

"The aborigines!" said Claude, a little bitterly; "you may as well call your fellow-creatures by the Ivors' name."

"Claude, you are unkind," replied Helen; "you talk of my being satirical; but there is no one, no one more severe than yourself."

"Yes, I own it," he exclaimed; "I was wrong. But, Helen,

darling, you know it was not against you I spoke. I understand—I know so well how it happens—I feel sure it is not your own taste. But it pains me, I own; it is so unlike what I long to see,—so unlike—may I quote the Bible to you?—the ‘charity which suffereth long, and is kind, and vaunteth not itself, and is not puffed up.’ And I feel too—you must let me say it—that it is so narrow and petty, my mind revolts from it, and then I show it. But I ought not to do it,—I ought to bear with it here; and by-and-by, at Helmsley—oh! Helen, you will learn, if for my sake only, to remember that in God’s sight the prince and the peasant are equal.”

“I do remember it now,” continued Helen. “There is nothing which jars upon me more than the vulgar assumption of rank.”

He repeated the word “vulgar.” “Yes, that is it, Helen. All that is vulgar is despised; but the vulgarity is measured by the standard of Ivors.”

“I have no other standard to measure it by,” replied Helen.

“No, you are right, and I am always doing you injustice by forgetting it. It is education.”

“The world is not accustomed to think quite so meanly of my education as you do,” said Helen, with some haughtiness.

“No doubt, it has been a very good education according to the world’s maxims; and Helen, dearest, don’t think I would be hard or disrespectful. I feel quite sure that Lady Augusta acted on what appeared to her the safest and wisest principles.”

“Only the results have not been satisfactory to you,” said Helen; “it is a pity that you did not make the discovery before doing me the honour to select me as a companion for life.”

“Helen!” exclaimed Claude, “that is an unfairness which is unworthy of you.”

He looked intensely pained. Helen’s conscience was touched, and she said more gently, “I cannot but think that your opinions on these points are exaggerated.”

“They may be,” he said; “and yet whenever I think upon them, reasonably and dispassionately, they are strengthened. I will speak generally. I see the same thing, more or less, wherever I go; and amongst really good people also,—people whom, in other respects, I can thoroughly admire. In almost every family, I see some particular standard set up, by which the whole world is to be measured; and whoever does not come up to the standard is, as it were, under sentence of excommunication.”

“But if the standard is a good and right one,” said Helen, “I don’t see where the harm can be.”

"God's standard is the highest," said Claude, "and He requires us all to come up to it; but when we fall short, He does not cut us off, or look upon us with contempt."

"I don't mean to be contemptuous," said Helen.

"Dearest, no! I am quite sure of it. I am certain it is only habit. Perhaps I should not have noticed it in you, only,—you must forgive my saying it,—it is the tone of the house."

"We are a little exclusive, I believe," said Helen; "but really it is impossible to help it, the people near us are so very vulgar and absurd."

"Possibly: I don't know any thing about them; I am only arguing generally. And you must allow, Helen, from your own experience, that persons who would be as kind as possible to the very poor, and would give away money to any extent, cannot resist the temptation of a sharp criticism upon individuals just one degree below them."

"Very difficult! I confess," said Helen, lightly; "and I will make you own it, Claude, if you are here the night of the ball."

"You may succeed easily enough," said Claude. "I feel the more keenly upon the subject because fastidiousness is my great temptation, and I have had such a keen battle with myself to subdue it."

"That is satisfactory," said Helen. "At any rate, we shall have a fellow feeling."

"Yes; only, Helen, we must meet upon the same ground, and acknowledge that the thing is wrong."

"Wrong! Not quite right, perhaps; a human infirmity."

"Oh, Helen, so much, much more than that. Please look at it truly."

"What? fastidiousness?" said Helen. "After all there is a great deal that is good in it."

"I don't see it," said Claude.

"It is founded upon a sense of beauty, refinement, delicacy of mind," said Helen.

"All of which we, of course, possess ourselves," said Claude.

Helen laughed. "If we were in the Palace of Truth I suppose we should be obliged to own it; so I may as well say, yes."

"And we are the exclusive judges of this beauty, and refinement, and delicacy," continued Claude.

"Absurd!" exclaimed Helen. "No one says that."

"But every one acts upon it," said Claude. "If it were not so, we should give our neighbours credit for being sometimes as likely

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Helen’s conscience was touched. “I cannot but think that your opinion of you.”

"And what will you do beyond that?" asked Claude.

Helen looked at him in surprise.

"Shall we be likely to meet these vulgar people in Heaven?" he continued.

"I don't understand, Claude; you are tiresome."

"I only wanted to know your opinion upon the subject," he replied; "because it strikes me that if such persons can have any reasonable hope of being admitted to Heaven, there must be something in them worthy of our consideration and regard upon earth."

Helen was touched by his earnestness, and answered humbly: "Claude, I wish I could think like you." And Claude's countenance brightened into happiness; and in that simple acknowledgment he read the realisation of all his hopes,—the conviction that Helen was perfect in intention, though possibly not always in practice. His eager satisfaction showed itself in warm praise; and Helen, pleased with herself, grew pleased with him, and yielding, as she always did, to impulse, became affectionate and confidential, and so the threatening cloud for the moment passed by.

CHAPTER XXX.

It was by a kind of mutual consent that the subject of Claude's journey to London was not again brought forward. Claude was too happy to think about it; Helen avoided it without examining why. She was in the most agreeable mood that afternoon, declined going to Dollington with Maurice, and was charmed that Claude should accompany her to Wingfield, and talk with Mrs. Graham about a plan he had formed for sending Kate Hope to Helmsley, to be under his housekeeper, and make herself useful in needlework. The idea had seized her fancy, and she entered into it with much warmth; indeed for the time being, this little work of kindness had quite taken the place of the ball in her interest. It would surely have been very unkind in any one to remind Claude, that characters are to be judged, not by hours and days, but by months and years. He did really think Helen perfect that afternoon; and unquestionably in outward form it would have been difficult to find any one more captivating, as she cantered her horse through the park, managing it with ease and grace, and talking with animation of the project by which it was

to be hoped that a comfortable home and occupation might be provided for the lame girl at Helmsley. Claude was never so thoroughly happy as when he could induce Helen to talk of Helmsley as of a place in which all her thoughts were centered. His London life was always to him an episode of existence. Helmsley, with its early associations, and the care of the people he had known from infancy, was the paradise to which he longed to transplant the lovely Eve upon whom his heart was fixed.

And Helen liked talking of the place, but it was not always in the way which suited Claude. She had a good deal of girlish curiosity, into which he was unable to enter. Questions about the number of rooms, the style of the furniture, the pictures and ornaments, were wearisome to him, for he had scarcely ever thought about them, and was often puzzled when called upon to describe them. He might even have been annoyed with her scrutiny upon these points, if it had been less simple. He was occasionally annoyed at Lady Augusta's questions, and once quietly declined answering some impertinent inquiries of Miss Manners; but Helen was, in some respects so like a child, that he was obliged to treat her as such, telling her all she wished to know, yet at the same time endeavouring to make her look upon the place, not merely as a home of beauty and pleasure, but as the centre of her duties.

Whether Helen chose to regard it in this light or not, depended upon the humour of the moment; and even on this good day, the mood now and then gave symptoms of coming to an end. They talked of Kate Hope till they reached Wingfield; and then Claude proposed that they should ride on a few miles further, and call on Mrs. Graham afterwards; and even this slight interruption gave something of a turn to Helen's quickly changing thoughts. She was amused by some oddly dressed people who were walking down the street, and was just beginning to launch forth in her usual strain of sharp satire, when the expression of Claude's face for the moment checked her. She became silent, and it was not quite so easy afterwards to engage her in the same kind of conversation which had given her pleasure before. Claude was very patient with her in these variable fancies, and by degrees succeeded in bringing round the subject again; and on they rode, Helen again talking as if her only object in existence was to live such a life as that of Susan Graham, a life spent for others, without thought for herself.

Poor Claude! how fascinating it was to him to hear her! It led him on farther than he had at first intended. It made him

feel so safe, so certain of her sympathy and love, he felt that he might ask any thing and not be refused; and at last he said, quite abruptly, "Helen, I wonder whether you would understand a feeling of mine, if I were to confess it to you?"

"I would try," replied Helen; "you tell me I can sometimes."

"Very often: in matters of taste always; but this is not quite taste. You will, perhaps, consider it a fancy. Lady Augusta would call it a crotchet."

"Mamma thinks many things crotchets which I don't," replied Helen.

"Well, then! it is a fancy about this ball;—morbid, perhaps—I can't say; but it stands in the way of my entering into it."

"And is the cause of your business in London," said Helen, laughing.

"Not exactly; I really have business. It is only the cause of my being less sorry to be away than I should have been on any other occasion."

"You don't patronise such things," said Helen; "we all know that."

"I don't care about them generally. I never disliked them thoroughly till now. Helen, can't you understand?"

He looked at her very earnestly, but Helen only answered lightly, "I suppose you think them undignified."

"Not for myself; I have no dignity to lose," he replied.

"But for me," exclaimed Helen. "You should have told me this before, Claude." Her tone showed pique and annoyance, and Claude answered quickly, "I could not put a mere fancy of my own against Lady Augusta's evident wish, and yours also. It would have seemed unreasonable folly; and besides, I am not so selfish as to wish to bind you by my own peculiar feelings. Perhaps I might have been better pleased if the ball had never been thought of, but when it was, I was not the person to interpose."

"Only you would prefer my not taking part in it, I suppose," said Helen, quietly, though her colour went and came very fast.

"No, indeed!" he exclaimed. "I would only—should you think me very severe, Helen, if I were to suggest that there are some dances, which I should feel very grateful if you would consent to give up? I know I am asking a great favour," he added, gently.

"A very great one," was Helen's short reply. "If I am only to dance quadrilles, which I suppose is what you mean, I may as well sit still the whole evening."

"It is very provoking," said Claude; "and I thought a great

deal before I could make up my mind to say any thing, knowing how I should disappoint you ; but I have such a strong feeling about it."

"And I suppose, then, I am never to dance the polka when I am married," said Helen.

"It would be my wish," said Claude ; "my taste is always offended by it."

Helen rode on in silent thought ;—presently she exclaimed : "I must say you very charitable people are the most uncharitable judges I know. You are doing the very thing, Claude, for which just now you blamed me. You set up a standard of right, and condemn every one who does not abide by it."

"Nay, dearest, excuse me," replied Claude ; "I set up no standard ; I express merely a personal feeling. With all my objections to a particular style of dancing, I should be shocked with myself, if I were to think harshly of those who join in it, and can see no evil. Possibly, probably, indeed, their minds are in a much better state than mine."

"It is all a matter of custom," said Helen. "Some one was talking the other day of a letter in the 'Spectator,' about the enormities of the country dance. Since you take the strict side in these matters, I wonder you don't object to that likewise."

"Of course it is a question of custom," replied Claude ; "if it were not so, the present style of dancing would be simply unendurable."

"Then if it is custom, there is no harm in it," said Helen.

"I ask my favour, Helen, for myself, without reference to any other point." His tone showed how much he was hurt by her wilful misapprehension ; and Helen was a little frightened, but too proud to yield the argument.

"Your nature is exacting," she said.

"Exacting !" His accent startled her. "Heaven knows—but no ; I will not boast, only God preserve me from such an evil."

"You use strong words," said Helen.

"Because I feel them," he replied. "Exacting natures are jealous natures, and I dread jealousy as the serpent evil which would utterly destroy domestic happiness. I don't say I could never feel it ; but I do know that if I were to do so I would give myself no rest, either in prayer or in a ceaseless struggle, till I had subdued it. No, where I love I must feel trust—unbounded, implicit. Even now I would have you free as the air, to look, and move, and think, and feel, according to the dictates

of your own pure and noble nature. And, once my wife, the tried love of centuries should not produce a fuller, deeper confidence than I would bestow upon you from the moment that I enjoyed the blessedness of calling you mine. There is no unworthy feeling, I trust, in my wish, Helen. If there be, I pray God to show it to me."

Helen's countenance changed during this speech; she was evidently moved by it: yet, even now, the unchecked pride and wilfulness of her character were too strong for her; and, as they stopped at the gate of Wingfield Court, she said: "I will mention your wish to mamma, and consult her about it."

Claude caught her bridle, as she was about to pass on. "Stay, Helen, stay!" he exclaimed, in a tone of deeply wounded feeling. "I will have no one consulted. If the favour I ask is not granted from affection, it is not worth my acceptance, I give it up."

Without allowing her time to answer him, he rode up to the house and rang the bell.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THREE weeks at home, with daily occupation and continual sources of interest, had done much for Susan Graham in restoring the balance of her mind. Her mother's judicious tact had saved her from the useless humiliation of acknowledging the incipient feelings which, if they had been reciprocated, would doubtless have expanded themselves into that deeply rooted and overpowering affection of which her heart was capable; and not even to herself did Susan allow that she had ever entertained any regard for Claude Egerton beyond that which their early acquaintance justified.

There was no morbidness in her character. Natural disposition and careful education had preserved her from such an evil; and when others, full of romance and excitement, though good and earnest, might have solaced themselves by brooding over the disappointments of life, Susan found her consolation in active exertion.

And there was full scope for such comfort. So many hearts clung to her, so many doors were open to her, above all she had been so trained to show and draw out sympathy, that each day brought with it some claim of duty or kindness to withdraw her

thoughts from herself, and teach her to find happiness in the happiness of her fellow-creatures.

It was a strangely different life from that which Helen led at Ivors. Occupations, pleasures, companionship—all were unlike. It might have been called a life in the world; she mixed with it, heard of it, knew something of its evils, something of its temptations; yet the brightness of an angel's purity could scarcely have seemed more unsullied than the heart of Susan Graham.

Is it a delusive imagination that the Hand of God is over those who meet with evil in the path of duty, so that, even when seen, handled, and touched, it has no power to injure them?

Helen was planning gaieties at Ivors, and Susan also was planning them at Wingfield. Charlie was at home, and it was necessary to make his holidays pleasant. Lady Augusta was going to give a grand ball; Mrs. Graham talked of a large children's party. The topic was under discussion on the day chosen by Claude for his first visit with Helen to Wingfield since their engagement. Perhaps Susan might not have borne her part in it so comfortably, if she had known what was hanging over her. The undefined dread of seeing Claude and Helen together was continually haunting her, but hitherto she had never been tried by it. The first week after Christmas had been wet; during the second, engagements of various kinds had interfered, and both Claude and Helen disliked riding through the town, and were not sorry to make excuses for going in another direction. When the third arrived, it seemed quite necessary to pay the visit, yet it was put off from day to day, until Claude was ashamed to defer it any longer, and persuaded Helen to go. But Susan thought less about the probability of such an event on this day than on many former days, because she happened to be particularly engaged with the arrangements for the children's party.

"How many are there going to be!" exclaimed Charlie, bursting into the room, and rushing up to his sister's writing-table. It was a holiday, and they had all been suffering in consequence from his exuberant spirits.

"More than you will know, Charlie," was Anna's reply, whilst she continued folding up the notes which Susan had been writing; "so run away like a good boy."

"But I must know, and I will, too; it is my own concern. You may as well give me the paper by fair means, Anna, or I shall get it by foul;" and he caught hold of Anna's arm, as

she held the paper out of his reach, and pulled it down, whilst she laughingly strove to keep it from him.

"Tiresome boy! and so strong too!" she exclaimed. "It is like a giant's grasp. I wish, Charlie, we could lock you up till the day came."

"Lock me up! Dear little chick!" He seized Anna by the throat, and kissed her first on one cheek, and then on the other, till she cried out for mercy. "I should just like you to try. They tried it at school the other day, and thought it a jolly good joke: and I was out of the window, and along the leads of the house, and over some roofs; and jump — down I came like a cat on my feet, and peeped in at the school-room window, frightening them out of their wits. They thought I was a ghost."

"You are not likely to frighten me out of my wits, but only out of my patience," replied Anna. "But here is mamma; now you must go."

Charlie jumped upon the table, as Mrs. Graham entered; crossed his arms, and looked provokingly determined. "Mamma, now haven't I a right? It's my party. Mustn't they tell me who's coming?"

"That depends upon circumstances. You are in the way now; so go back to your workshop: when we want you we will send for you."

"But you won't have a set of old fogies. I can't bear them. Just let me say who sha'n't come, and you shall say who shall."

"A considerable amount of importance you young gentlemen claim for yourselves," said Susan, giving her last note to Anna, to direct, — "a veto upon all matters."

"Of course! Magister, magistri, magistro! What is the use of going to school if one does n't learn the value of the masculine gender?" exclaimed Charlie.

"And the power of the feminine," said Mrs. Graham quietly. "My dear boy, I really do want you to go;" and in an instant Charlie descended from his elevated position, and ran off, turning round at the door, to declare once more, that he felt it his duty to make a protest against "fogies."

Anna shut the door behind him, and came back to her mother. "Now that he is gone, there is hope. Dear mamma, we wanted you. Susan, and Isabella, and I, have some conscience fidgets."

"Not about new invitations, I hope?" said Mrs. Graham; "we shall have such a number now, that the room will scarcely hold them."

"They won't all come," said Susan; "and there are two or three;—I made a list of them;—Anna, you had it." Anna

found it carefully put away in her writing-case. "Mr. Conyers has a niece coming to him, a girl of sixteen; I don't think we can leave her out; and the Morrisons have two little cousins, orphans, so Mrs. Lowrie says; and she thinks they would be charmed with the Christmas tree, though they are too young to dance."

"It will involve making more presents," said Mrs. Graham; "and you are not nearly ready now."

"The presents are no trouble," said Anna. "Isabella can make a little needle-book, or some trifle of that kind."

"Poor Isabella seems the victim on this occasion," said Mrs. Graham; "she has been working till her fingers ache for the last fortnight."

"I don't think she cares," said Susan; "she is very merry about it, and she likes working a great deal better than going out. And then," continued Anna, — "don't be frightened, dear mamma, — but Miss Harvey has a sister with her, and I was describing the tree to them, and they had never heard of such a thing before, — and we thought — would it be very odd to ask them to come and look at it?"

Mrs. Graham considered a little. "We can't exactly invite them to spend the evening, my love; it would be out of place."

"But only just to come and see the tree, and have a little present," said Anna. "I thought I would make Miss Harvey a case for her knitting-needles; she wants one, I know."

"They would only come just for five minutes," said Susan; "and you know, mamma, one has a kind of feeling about a thing which takes up so much time and thought as a Christmas tree, that it ought to be made to give as much pleasure as possible."

"Quite so, dear child. The only thing to be considered is, whether one does give pleasure by bringing persons together who are not accustomed to meet; but I don't see any objection now. One of the good things about these children's parties is, that one may break through strict etiquette. Only, Anna, the invitation had better be made by yourselves. Just say, that if Miss Harvey and her sister would not think it a trouble to come and look at the tree when it is lighted, I shall be very glad to see them here."

"And Charlie can go for them, and take them back," said Anna; "it is just what he will like, he is so fond of Miss Harvey."

"Oh! and mamma, about Kate Hope;" continued Susan; "she wants to stay for the tree too, only she didn't like to ask."

"And you know we have a present for her," said Anna: "the book which we meant to have given her on New Year's Day. We thought she would like it so much coming off the tree."

"I hope the servants will see better than they did last time," said Susan; "people crowded so before them. Don't you think, mamma, it would be a good thing to have them in first?"

"Perhaps it might. About Kate Hope, it must depend upon the arrangements at Helmsley. Mr. Egerton sent me word he had heard from his housekeeper, and meant to come the first day he could, to talk about the plan."

"Are they in such a dreadful hurry?" asked Anna. "I thought Lady Hume said, the other day, that she believed there was no time fixed for the marriage."

"I suppose it will be soon after Easter," replied Mrs. Graham.

"The Admiral doesn't wish for such haste," said Anna.

"Who told you so, my love?" inquired Mrs. Graham.

Anna blushed. "Mamma, I am afraid I am very naughty, but the Admiral is always quoting 'There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip,'—and I can't help understanding."

"I hope it will be soon after Easter," said Susan. It was a very peculiar tone—quiet, but forced.

Mrs. Graham gave one glance at Susan, but said nothing. Anna exclaimed, laughingly: "Most oracular! a mine of meaning underneath!"

Susan tried to speak more lightly. "I only mean that long engagements are—I don't know what or why—but they are bad things, mamma, aren't they?"

"Deep as the mysteries of Delphi!" continued Anna.

Mrs. Graham interrupted her.

"Long engagements, as a general rule, try the strength of affection beyond what is right. Persons are thrown into new circumstances, and form new ties and interests, and the first freshness of their happiness wears off, and their hearts grow sick with hope deferred; and then coolness, and misunderstanding, and disappointment, are likely to follow."

"But not where people love truly," exclaimed Susan; "a life would not be too long to wait then."

"There are so many, many, shades of love," replied Mrs. Graham. "And in the first exuberance of happiness, when persons are engaged, it is easy to mistake them."

"I hope Helen won't consent to wait long," said Susan. The tone was, as before, very forced; but Mrs. Graham would not, and Anna did not, observe it. Her attention was distracted by the clattering of horses' feet; and Susan's words had scarcely been uttered, when Claude and Helen rode up to the door.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"I HAVE been wishing every day to see you," was Mrs. Graham's greeting, as Helen and Claude entered the room. She extended a hand to each, and her face told much more than her words. Another hand was timidly given also, and a lower and rather trembling voice said: "We thought you would have come before;" and then Susan drew back behind her sisters, and placed a chair for Helen near the fire, and asked if she was cold.

"A little. The wind is sharp." Helen moved away from the light, and bent over the fire, and put out her hands to warm them.

Claude was like himself, a little stiff, a little stern and reserved. He began almost immediately upon the subject of Kate Hope. A letter from his housekeeper had been received that morning. She would be ready for Kate any day that might be named.

"I had thought of sending her immediately," was Mrs. Graham's reply; "but Susan tells me she is wishing to stay till next week, when we talk of having a Christmas tree. Of course, though, she would go, if she is wanted before. There must be a good deal to be done at Helmsley;" and Mrs. Graham smiled.

"Yes, a good deal." But Claude did not smile, and added: "There is no such very great cause for haste."

"Perhaps Helen or you would like to see Kate," said Mrs. Graham. "Helen, my love, don't you think it would be as well?"

Helen had been speaking to Anna, and had not heard. The question was repeated. She started: "Yes; no. It is Claude's business."

"Scarcely," said Claude. "I am no judge of a workwoman's duties."

"Your housekeeper will know all about it, no doubt," said Helen. "It had better be left to her."

In her pride, Helen hoped that she had spoken so as to conceal her temper, but every one in the room remarked it; and Mrs. Graham changed the conversation, and inquired when Mr. Egerton thought of going to London.

It was Claude's turn then to be embarrassed; and his reply was nearly as short as Helen's. "He did not know, and had not made up his mind."

Mrs. Graham would have been singularly dull if she had failed to remark that something was wrong; her knowledge of Helen suggested the probable cause,—a difference of opinion, in which

Helen had shown temper, and given pain. In such cases it was always better to leave her to herself without notice; and Mrs. Graham went on talking to Claude, without addressing her again for some minutes. Kate Hope's business was soon settled. She was to stay till the end of the following week, and then go to Helmsley under the escort of Claude's agent, who was to come to him at Ivors very shortly, and return about that time. Mrs. Graham dared not ask any more questions about plans or London. Claude's manner was too coldly impenetrable to allow of it.

There came a pause, — and Claude turned to Susan, a smile on his face, the first which had brightened it since he entered the room. "You have a blind friend, I think, Miss Graham. I remember your telling me about her one day. I thought perhaps you would be interested in an account of the way in which the blind and deaf-and-dumb asylums are managed in America." He drew out a small pamphlet and gave it to her.

Susan's thanks were scarcely audible; but Mrs. Graham took up the subject directly, and talked, for her, very fast, about blind people in general, and Mrs. Lowrie especially, — directing Claude's attention to herself, and allowing of no second pause. Claude seemed quite relieved at finding some one who would talk for him. His eye was very wandering, and he was often absent, and said "yes," and "no," in the wrong place. Helen moved across the room, and his glance followed her. Susan asked her to go up stairs and look at the ornaments prepared for the Christmas tree, and Claude started as if he had been asked to go too. Whatever Helen might be feeling, it was evident that his coldness towards her was not the cause of complaint; and so far Mrs. Graham was relieved.

"Are you in a hurry, Claude?" said Helen, stiffly, as she rose to leave the room with Susan.

He took out his watch. "It is a quarter to four; Lady Augusta doesn't wish you to be out late."

"I really can't be tied down by mamma's fidgets," exclaimed Helen. "We were out yesterday till after five, and it didn't signify."

"Lady Augusta complained to me, and I promised her it should not happen again," replied Claude.

"Mamma made no objection to our going to Dollington," said Helen; "and if we had gone we should have been much later."

Claude was provoked in spite of himself. He answered sharply, "Lady Augusta trusts me, and I can't annoy her. I must ask you not to be long."

"Come, Susan," said Helen; and she hurried away without any definite reply.

Claude said no more, but walked to the window.

Mrs. Graham spoke to Anna: "I wish, my love, you would go and see what Charlie is doing. He wanted some one to go out with him.

Anna knew every thing, as she always did,—that Claude and Helen were out of humour with each other, and that her *mamma* was, very probably, going to talk to Mr. Egerton about it. But her curiosity and interest in other people's affairs never went farther than her own mind. There was the impulse to go to Isabella and give vent to her suspicions; but then, again, there was the lady-like caution and self-restraint which had been instilled into her from infancy: so she went to find Charlie, and put her curiosity to sleep.

Mrs. Graham felt very nervous. Claude remained looking out of the window. Could she venture to interfere, knowing so little of him? But Helen was her niece, her sister's child, only one degree less dear to her than her own. At the risk of being misunderstood, she said, "Helen is a little fond of tormenting."

"Very," said Claude, shortly; and he turned round and drew near the fire.

"She does herself injustice, when in these moods," continued Mrs. Graham.

He smiled rather bitterly.

"One is apt to forget that she is, in many ways, a child," said Mrs. Graham.

"She does her best to make me remember it," was the reply, whilst a harsh little laugh followed the words; and Claude carelessly took up a book, and asked if there was a good library in Wingfield.

Mrs. Graham's boldness increased. "We are very old friends, Mr. Egerton; and old friends are allowed sometimes to take liberties. I am sure you will be merciful to Helen."

"More merciful, ten thousand times, than she is to me," he replied, in a tone which was more severe than any words.

Mrs. Graham went on very quietly: "She wants training only,—the training which, I am sure, you will give. Her faults are all easily seen; but she will never disappoint you in the depth of her character."

"We should never have been what we are to each other if I had not thought so," he replied.

"Perhaps," continued Mrs. Graham, "I am more able to under-

stand her than even those who have lived with her from childhood. She inherits certain characteristics which make her very dear to me, even when she vexes me."

Claude held out his hand, and said, "Thank you; I feel that she is dear to you."

"And you will promise me to be patient, then?" said Mrs. Graham, with a smile, as she warmly returned the hearty pressure of his hand; "and if ever ——" she paused.

Claude understood her. "If ever we want a friend, we shall both feel that no one can be found more true than yourself."

Mrs. Graham looked relieved. "That is just what I wanted to say. I am quite aware that no third person can expect to do much for those who should be, and who must be, as one; but it is sometimes a relief to know that one may speak of a trifling annoyance without fear of giving a wrong impression."

"Helen need never fear the consequences of *trifling* annoyances," said Claude, quickly.

"And she will never give you cause to complain of great ones," said Mrs. Graham.

He was silent, took up his hat, and went towards the door, saying that he wished to give some order about the horses; came back, and once more grasped Mrs. Graham's hand, and hurried away.

She saw him standing by the horses, and afterwards walking up and down the gravel sweep; but he did not return to her again.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HELEN followed Susan to her room with the proud step of determined wilfulness, and in that same mood she inspected the various articles which were brought forward, gave her opinion of them, talked lightly, and laughed, though with a hollow mirth, which left the echo of sadness behind. It was very painful to Susan, much more so than any burst of feeling could have been; it jarred upon her, and made her feel angry; and Helen's affectionate words were received coldly, in spite of her endeavours to the contrary. Helen saw this, and it increased her pride. She lingered much longer than was necessary, inspecting every little trifle, and asking useless questions, whilst appearing not to perceive that Susan, every now and then, went into the adjoining room to look at the

horses, which the gardener was leading up and down the sweep. She was, however, obliged to notice the fact at last, for Susan came back, and said, "Mr. Egerton is there, waiting."

"Is he?" Helen went on, slowly winding up a little yard measure.

"He will be impatient," said Susan.

"Then it will do him good to be taught a lesson to the contrary."

"Helen! how like a naughty child!" exclaimed Susan.

"Not at all. I have no notion of spoiling people."

"Though you have been spoiled yourself," remarked Susan.

"So you are pleased to tell me. But you need have no fears for the future; Claude will never spoil me."

"Probably not, if you tease him in the way you are doing now."

"Tease him! it is he who teases me. I have no notion of allowing any man to be so domineering."

"Helen! Helen! how unjust!" exclaimed Susan. "Mr. Egerton is the last person ——"

Helen interrupted her. "Perhaps you will allow me to judge from my own experience, Susan. You cannot possibly tell what Mr. Egerton will or will not do; unless"—and there was a marked asperity in her tone—"he has been pleased to confide his private feelings to you."

Susan's countenance changed, but she answered in a tone of quiet dignity: "Dear Helen, you must of course know more of Mr. Egerton than I do; and I can have no right to make any remark about him: but I think you are wrong to thwart him unnecessarily."

Helen turned away. Susan thought she was angry; but when she approached and kissed her, tears were streaming down her face.

Helen sat down, and tried to brush them away, and looked up with a smile; but it would not do; they came faster than before. "I don't know what is the matter,—it is very silly," she said; pride still urging her to conceal her real feelings.

"If I could help you I would, you know," said Susan.

"You might, but you would think me wrong. We are so different! Susan, I can't be obedient."

Susan smiled, in spite of herself. "Helen, dear! all persons who know you know that."

"And Claude wishes me to be," continued Helen. "He is exacting; I feel I shall be kept in perpetual restraint, and I can't be, I won't be; he must learn it now, or, Susan, we shall be miserable;" and then came a burst of passionate tears.

A mist seemed to hang upon Susan's eyes, a weight pressed upon her brain; yet she answered calmly, "Dearest Helen! it may not be Mr. Egerton's fault; it may be your own. I suppose all men are exacting when they love. It must be love which makes them so; and he is so good and kind, so devoted to you. One word would put all right now, but you may vex him too far."

"Too far!" Helen started up, her eyes flashing with indignation; "what is a man's affection worth, if he is to be vexed too far?"

"Men are human," said Susan.

"Then let him be vexed too far!" replied Helen, haughtily; "better before marriage than after it."

Susan seized her cousin's hand; her voice trembled. "Helen! dear, dear, Helen! Think what you say; what a treasure you are casting from you. Let mamma talk to you; she will understand and help you. Let me go for her! Oh, Helen! you make me so wretched."

And Susan spoke truth; she was wretched, miserable, for Helen; yet the mist still brooded upon her; the veil through which she dared not penetrate hung before her eyes.

"I will speak to no one but you; none else can help me; and it is such folly; you only will understand and bear with me. Susan, you may think me mad, a childish idiot, but—he would bind me down—I can't say it; it is such nothingness."

"Then why not give in, if it is nothing?" said Susan.

"But it is something; it is restraint, tyranny, jealousy," exclaimed Helen; "it is about—Susan don't despise me;—he wants me to promise—he has absurd fancies about dancing, and he would not let me be free like other girls. But you won't understand, because my aunt was always so particular with you. He would only let me dance quadrilles, and he may be going away himself, and——"

"Helen! dearest!"—Susan's face expressed what she could not find words to say.

"You think me wrong," exclaimed Helen; "but you can't comprehend."

"It is such a slight favour!" said Susan, reproachfully.

"To you, perhaps; but I was not born to be a slave."

"But you were born to love," said Susan.

"Love has nothing to do with it," exclaimed Helen. "If he loved me, he would let me be free."

"And he will let you be free in all essentials," continued Susan, "I am sure of it; but,"—she finished the sentence hurriedly,—

"I think if you had considered the matter, you would scarcely have waited for him to ask the favour; you would rather have suggested it."

Helen was struck by her cousin's tone, and as the colour crimsoned her cheeks, she said, "You think me undignified then?"

"I think that kind of dancing is undignified," replied Susan.

Helen pouted, and was silent.

Susan continued eagerly: "But surely it is not a question of my opinion, or of any other person's, Helen. If Mr. Egerton wishes it——"

"You think I ought to give in," said Helen, coldly.

"I can't doubt for a moment."

"But you are not in my place; you don't know all that has passed."

"Of course I judge only for myself; but, Helen," — Susan's voice grew tremulous in its earnestness, — "it seems to me—I have never been loved as you are—but I think that if I were, it would be my greatest pleasure to yield; that it would be no yielding in fact, only the carrying out of my own will, because there could only be one heart."

Helen was silent for a moment; then in a low voice she said, "It might be so with you."

A knock at the door interrupted Susan's reply. Mrs. Graham was come to hurry Helen, and, as she entered, Susan, without saying any thing more, went away.

"You must go, my love," said Mrs. Graham to Helen; "Mr. Egerton will be tired of waiting, and it won't do to keep him."

Helen's pride rebelled secretly against the order; but there was something about Mrs. Graham which always prevented her from showing temper before her.

"He is excessively patient," continued Mrs. Graham; "he has been walking up and down the sweep for the last quarter of an hour."

"It won't do him any harm," said Helen, shortly.

"But it does yourself harm, dear child. I shall scold you if you don't learn punctuality, now that you are going to have a house of your own."

Mrs. Graham's kiss neutralised the quickness of her words; and Helen, softened, as she always was by the peculiar tenderness of manner which her aunt showed towards her, said, whilst she looked steadily in Mrs. Graham's face, "Aunt Fanny, if I had come to school to you I should have been a better child."

"Never too late to mend, dearest, only remember"—Mrs.

Graham's tone became more serious—"it may some day be too late to undo the consequences of not having mended before."

"I am not Susan," said Helen; "I must be myself, and people must take me as I am."

'But you can be your best self, my darling—your truest, noblest self!'

"I have no best self. I am wretched and good-for-nothing," exclaimed Helen; and she sat down, and leaned her forehead upon her hands.

Mrs. Graham put her arm round her fondly, and said, "We all have a best self, Helen. If we had not, we should be demons instead of human beings. And your best self has great capabilities, and will, through God's help, lead you above all the pettiness and irritation of this weary life, if only you will listen to it, and listen to Claude, who will assist you in strengthening and perfecting it."

"Yes, he is very good, but he is impatient;" and Helen started up and arranged the folds of her riding habit.

"And somebody likes to make him so," said Mrs. Graham, half severely, half playfully.

"Aunt Fanny, you were born under a favourable conjunction of the planets; you don't know what it is to have a stormy influence always at work upon you."

Mrs. Graham considered an instant; then she said, "The stormiest natures may at last become the calmest, from the very force exercised to control them. Helen, dearest, you have great power of will; don't let it be used only to throw away happiness."

Helen made no reply, but, giving her aunt a parting kiss, hurried down stairs.

Claude and Helen rode in silence until they had passed the Lodge at Ivors and were in sight of the house; then Helen said, "It was very naughty in me, Claude, to keep you waiting so long."

Claude replied, "It doesn't signify; we shall be at home in time." And they rode on again.

Claude assisted Helen to dismount, as usual; but he was excessively cold in his manner, and, instead of following her into the house, went to the stables, under pretence of wishing to speak to one of the grooms.

Helen was met by Lady Augusta and Miss Manners.

"Just returned, my love? That is very right; I was afraid you would be tempted to stay out late."

"'The feast of reason and the flow of soul' are so seductive," observed Miss Manners.

"It is very cold," said Helen; and she ran up the stairs, stumbling on her riding-habit and dropping her whip; and, hurrying to her own room, bolted the door, and wrote a little note, which was taken to Claude as he was dressing for dinner.

"I have been very wrong and am very unhappy; can you forgive me? I have such cause to be ashamed of myself! but of course I will do whatever you wish.—H. C."

Helen wondered when she met Claude again that there was still a shade of constraint in his manner.

But she was not in love. He was.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHERE was the Admiral all this time? Ill with a violent attack of feverish influenza, ending, as all his ailments did, with a fit of the gout. Barnes, who knew more about his master and his master's feelings than he chose to let the world discover, attributed it openly to a sharp blast, which the Admiral had encountered at a particular angle of the shrubbery: in private conversation with his intimate friend, the housekeeper, he decided that the disease was mental. "On the nerves, Mrs. Euston, on the nerves, you may depend upon it; the Admiral takes to his bed for comfort. The wind has set in contrary, and he can't make head against it. You'll see if I'm not right. If I a'n't, why isn't Mr. Egerton here as he used to be?"

That was a strange fact. Claude, who used to be at the Lodge at least twice a week, and was never denied admittance except on some urgent necessity, had called five times within the last three weeks, and each time been informed that the Admiral was keeping his room, and could not see any one.

The answer was true enough to satisfy the old man's conscience. He was very unwell, and not in a state to bear any interview which might excite or vex him: but six weeks before, even if he had been unable to see Claude, he would at least have sent him some affectionate message. There was nothing of the kind now, —not even any notice taken of the letter which Claude had sent, detailing the circumstances of his engagement, confessing that, at first sight, the Admiral might have cause to think him hasty, and

frankly owning that the fascination which had at last subdued him was greater than he had been at all prepared for, and entreating, most earnestly, that the friend, whose good opinion was so dear to him, would endeavour to overcome any prejudice he might entertain, and consider the case as one in which Claude's happiness was most deeply interested.

It was not in human nature to bear this silence without being hurt. Claude's feelings were wounded deeply. He felt that both Helen and himself were treated unjustly. It was scarcely pride. Claude loved his old friend too sincerely to be proud. He was willing to humour him in indifferent matters, and to be treated as a boy even, if it suited the Admiral's whim. So large a debt of gratitude was due on his part, that no ordinary sacrifice would have been considered too great, if it were to give the Admiral pleasure. But Claude could never sacrifice his independence. He had chosen, as he thought, wisely for his own happiness; and now Helen's feelings were involved as well as his own. For her sake he considered himself bound to demand courtesy and kindness, if not full approbation. Lady Augusta had already made some uncomfortable remarks upon the Admiral's behaviour. Miss Manners was quite severe upon him; and Lady Louisa, who had a most unhappy knack of finding out whatever did not concern her, and then turning her discoveries to a painful use, had more than once given hints as to the probable cause of this extraordinary conduct, attributing it to the influence of Mrs. Graham; which irritated Claude, and made his defence of his friends more prejudicial to their interest than silence.

It was after having endured some such inuendoes, that he set forth for the Lodge the day after his ride with Helen, determined to insist, at all hazards, upon seeing the Admiral, and forcing him to look more favourably upon a state of affairs which at any rate it was too late now to alter. If they could only meet, Claude was certain that all would be well. The Admiral was never proof against Claude's affectionate candour; and in whatever little quarrels they had hitherto had, Claude was always in the end the conqueror. Perhaps it was the knowledge of this which now made the Admiral so shy in admitting him to his presence.

"My master is very unwell indeed to-day, sir," was Barnes' reply to the first inquiry made by Claude.

Unsatisfactory news that was for Claude, and he had not quite the spirits to meet it. He had come because he always tried to keep faith with himself, as well as with other people; and having resolved to see the Admiral, he was not going to be a coward,

and shrink from his engagement. But there was a certain mis-giving and discomfort at the bottom of his heart, into which he did not care to examine.

Barnes saw the change in his countenance, and, attributing it to anxiety, assured him that there was nothing to make him uneasy; the Admiral had not slept very well; there had been a mistake made in his medicine, but Mr. Conyers was going to send him some colchicum; no doubt he would be much better in a day or two.

"But I wanted to see him; I came over on purpose," said Claude. "Is he out of his room?"

"Just talking of coming into the library, sir; but I have been trying to persuade him not."

A still greater difficulty! for the Admiral was fidgety about seeing any one in his bed-room, as Claude knew by experience.

"If you could move him into the library, it might give him change; and he might perhaps allow me to come and help him."

"Perhaps so, sir;" but Barnes appeared doubtful. "Do you wish me to tell him you are here?"

"Yes, certainly." Claude's tone was rather impatient. "Say I have walked over from Ivors on purpose; and that I may probably be going to London very soon, so that I am particularly anxious to see him."

Barnes departed, and Claude was left in the hall to meditate upon the approaching interview.

The weight upon his spirits increased. Helen's image was before him, lovely and fascinating, and the glow of an overpowering affection kindled his eager longing to justify himself for the choice he had made; and then a cold doubt seemed to creep into his veins, and stealthily make its way till it glided into his heart, and checked its rapid pulsation, and deadened the thrill of happiness which followed the thought that she was his by her own promise, her own voluntary consent. The words of her note recurred to him, interpreted by the candid, self-accusing tone in which she had afterwards repeated to himself the reproaches of her own conscience. Surely, it was all he could wish. He had never thought her faultless; he knew she was not. From the beginning he had looked upon her as

"A creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food."

He only required that she should consent to be trained; and she did, in the simplest, humblest way; no sooner offending than she acknowledged her offence. Why was he not satisfied?

Claude reproached himself ; he dwelt upon Helen's charms,—repeating them to himself with a spirit of detail which might in itself have given cause for suspicion that all was not right ; for love, mutual, trusting love, inquires not why it loves : and by the time Barnes returned with a half sulky message from the Admiral, that if Mr. Egerton was going to London so soon, he supposed he had better see him, Claude had reached a state as little resembling the enthusiasm of an all-sufficing reciprocated affection as the pale gleam of a November day resembles the glowing sunshine of July.

It was not a fortunate mood for his meeting with the Admiral ; and the old man's chilling welcome was as freezing to Claude as his own thoughts. " Well, Claude ! how are you ? You've called a good many times, and I haven't seen you ; but I have had a hard bout of it, what with cold and gout ; and it's best to keep to oneself at those times."

" I hoped, sir, you might have made an exception in my favour. I was very anxious to see you."

Claude had no moral cowardice in his composition, and was determined to enter upon the unwelcome subject at once.

" Anxious to see me, were you ? Perhaps that was more than I was to see you ;" and the Admiral laughed shortly, and added : " You had best learn to speak out, Claude. There has not been much anxiety to see me, I'll warrant."

" I never say what I don't mean, sir," replied Claude, proudly ; and then checking himself, with the consciousness of the absurdity of taking umbrage at his old friend's pettish words. " I did want to see you very much : especially as you have not written to me."

" What ! you thought I was going to send a letter of congratulation ! I leave that to your friends at Ivors."

" I have no friends, sir, whose congratulations I should value like your own. Not that I expected them on the present occasion. I knew I must vex you. But I hoped that, considering the matter only regards myself, you might have brought yourself to look upon it a little more favourably."

" I beg your pardon, Claude. The matter is not one which only concerns yourself. It's what all men say when they are in love,—and greater nonsense there can't be. Why ! marriages ! they concern the whole world, present and future. How do you and I know that we aren't suffering now for the follies of our fathers' fathers, back to Noah ?"

Claude could not refrain from a smile ; and the Admiral went on : " You may laugh ; let him laugh who wins. Try your

bonny lady for a couple of years, and then come and see whether you won't be inclined to laugh at the other side of your mouth." Claude half started from his seat; but the Admiral, maliciously pleased to have touched him, laid his stick across him, and said, "Eh? restive?"—and Claude threw himself back in his chair, biting his lip till it gave him pain, as the Admiral mercilessly continued: "Doubtless you've much to say for yourself. What man ever did a foolish thing, who hadn't?"

"I don't grant, sir, that it is a foolish thing," exclaimed Claude. "I am and must be the best judge of my own heart, and I can suffer no person to interfere with me upon such a point."

"No interference, because you are in love! Why man! there needs a new world to contain the fools who have had that excuse for the sins and miseries they have brought into this one. I never heard of a planet yet that was large enough to hold them."

"At any rate the deed is done," said Claude, shortly.

"Aye, there it is, as it has been from the beginning! Follow your will first; and then say, it can't be helped, so make the best of it."

"It seems the only way to take the consequences of our actions," replied Claude; "and I am quite willing to abide by mine." The accent on "quite" was a little faint.

The Admiral caught up his words: "Well enough to say, Claude! But take my word for it, it's an unsafe rule. Bearing the consequences of our misdeeds won't do away with the misdeeds themselves. And if a man rushes into a foolish marriage with his eyes open, he may be as brave as Hercules in bearing the troubles it brings, but he's not one whit less accountable for the first false step."

"I have yet to learn that I am about to make a false step, sir," said Claude, proudly.

The Admiral shrugged his shoulders, and was silent; and Claude continued in the same tone: "It has been my wish, sir, always, that when I did marry, my wife should be approved by you. I have hoped that she might add to your happiness as well as my own, for she would always be taught to love and venerate you; but with this unfortunate prejudice——"

"Prejudice, man! why it's knowledge, fact! Haven't I known the girl from her babyhood?"

"Very different knowledge that, sir, from the intimate acquaintance of——"

"A fellow who's in love!" exclaimed the Admiral. "As well send a blind man into a picture gallery and take his account of its beauties. But go on—go on—say what you can for your fair lady."

"I say nothing, sir," said Claude, very coldly; "you must forgive me for observing that it is useless to argue against prejudice."

His manner a little alarmed the Admiral, who, with all his testiness and dictatorial habits, knew, by experience, that it was possible to provoke Claude too far. He softened his tone a little, and said: "My good friend, you are taking up the cudgels when there's no need; what is the matter to me, do you think? I am not going to marry the girl."

"I should almost have imagined that you were, sir, by the thought you bestow upon her," was Claude's reply.

"Up in the clouds, I see! Well! natural enough, perhaps. I was mainly taken with a pretty face myself, when I was a young man; taken only for a time though, Claude,—remember that,—just enough to make me take a dance with her and say civil things; but when it came to a question of marriage"—the Admiral's voice changed;—"but we won't talk of that. It has been my prayer for many a day that you might have a right judgment in the matter; since it has been God's Will to deny me, His Will be done."

The accent of reverent yet bitter disappointment went more to Claude's heart than all the Admiral's hasty reproaches. He left his chair, drew near the old man, and said gently, and with the deference of a son addressing a father: "My dear, dear sir, if you knew how deeply, how earnestly, I have wished to please you, in this and in all other of the great events of my life! It has been the one bitter drop in my cup of happiness, that I knew it would give you pain."

The Admiral's lip quivered.

"You will scarcely believe me," continued Claude. "I know that all men in love are thought selfish; and doubtless that is their great temptation. I won't put myself above other men. I have loved, I do love passionately, blindly perhaps. I would put aside all attempts to form a judgment of my conduct, or an excuse for it; but this I will say for myself, that the one earnest petition which I have offered since my happiness was secured, has been that it might never render me forgetful of what I owe my friends."

"Do you think, Claude, I should care if I thought your happiness was secured?" said the Admiral, reproachfully; and then correcting himself, he added, "or, perhaps, I might care; perhaps I have been an idiot; perhaps I have sat by myself, thinking,—lonely folks will think,—and letting myself fancy what I should most like, forgetting that there are few enough years remaining for me to see either likes or dislikes. Let it be! I was a weak

old man, and God has punished me for building castles for this world, when I should have been looking out for His City in the next. But it would all be nothing, Claude, it would all go, if I could say to myself, my boy has got a wife who will make his home happy, and keep him up to his duty to his Maker and his country."

"And Helen will, sir; she has spirit, feeling, the most hearty wish to do right, the most entire appreciation of goodness."

"But has she practice, man? has she practice?"

"She is so young, she has never had the opportunity: she is scarcely out of the schoolroom," replied Claude.

"And wants a governess still!" exclaimed the Admiral, shaking his head. "Oh! Claude, Claude!"

"She will be the more easily trained," was the reply.

"And the more easily spoilt," replied the Admiral; "though it's too late, Claude, yet take the word of one who has seen many more things in his day than you have. There's no greater blunder a man can commit than that of taking a woman for his wife in the hope of training her. She may be trained, I grant it; God will train her, as He does all of us, by trouble and sorrow; but before the work is done, there may be priceless souls, children and servants, injured, possibly even lost for Eternity, because she was persuaded to take upon herself duties for which she wasn't fit."

"Sensible men and women would never venture to marry according to that argument, sir," said Claude; "they would never consider themselves fit for such responsibilities."

"Just as well, perhaps, in nine cases out of ten, if they didn't," replied the Admiral; "but the world must go on, and will go on, its own way, in spite of prudence and common sense. As to my argument, Claude, it doesn't go as far as you make it. People can't try experiments beforehand to see if their wives are fit to manage a house and bring up children; but I'll tell you what they can do. They can see how the woman they are thinking about is doing the duties which are set before her. That is God's way with us; if we do one thing well, He sets us upon something higher; if we don't, He lets us stand still, and in the end sink lower. A good sister and a good daughter is ready to be a good wife, though she has never tried the duties of one; but there's no taking a leap in virtue. A woman won't be a selfish sawney one minute, and a hearty, pains-taking mistress of a family the next."

"You forget the influence of love, sir," said Claude.

The Admiral smiled a little sarcastically. "I am not likely to

do that, Claude, when I am talking to a young man engaged to be married. Trust to love if you will; but remember, there's many a thing besides poverty which, when it peeps in at the door, sends love flying out of the window. Temper, and indolence, and selfishness, they all work; and if it's a struggle between them, as it's sure to be if the woman isn't well tutored beforehand, why they'll get the victory over love."

Claude was silent for some seconds; then he said, with evident effort, "I must ask some day, sir, to bring Helen with me here, that you may judge for yourself that I have not quite cause to fear all the evils you prognosticate for me."

"Bring her, yes, bring her if you will, but don't think I pretend to prognosticate for you. Men aren't all made alike, and perchance you may like what I shouldn't. And as for the girl, why I grant you she's a pretty girl, and a lady, and Frances Graham's niece, which is the best I can say for her; and if you were to take her away from the old woman at Ivors, and send her to school to her aunt for the next five years, I won't say but that at the end of that time she might be good for something; not perhaps good enough for your wife;—but that's the old feeling, Claude; you'll forgive it, my good fellow, you'll forgive it."

Claude held the Admiral's hand affectionately. "I am very grateful to you, sir,—much more than you may think. It has been a great weight on my heart not to have seen you."

"And on mine too, perhaps, Claude; and on my conscience besides, perchance. It's wrong to build castles, I ought to have known it; but there—God bless you, my boy, and give you happiness in your own way, since you wouldn't have it in mine."

A tear stood in Claude's eye, a tear of sympathy for that bygone phantom of early love which haunted the old man's loneliness, and seemed to cast its spell upon all he thought, or felt, or did.

He went back to Ivors comforted; but it was with the thought of the Admiral, not of Helen.

CHAPTER XXXV.

YET Helen did give Claude comfort on that day, and on many ensuing days. It seemed as if the childish burst of petulant rebellion against his wishes to which she had given way, had worked for good in humbling and softening her; or perhaps Mrs.

Graham's short warning and Susan's words had touched her more than she dared acknowledge. The good fit lasted surprisingly long and produced astonishing effects. It made her careful and charitable in expressing her opinions of the "aborigines," and induced her sometimes to check Maurice in the contemptuous tone which he had learned to adopt about all persons found without the charmed circle of Ivors. She consulted Claude, and deferred to his taste. She read his books and discussed them with him. She looked over his plans of improvement at Helmsley, and made some very good suggestions of her own. There were no clouds, or fits of listlessness; and she even went so far in self-denial and self-discipline as to consent to take a lesson in the elements of geology from Miss Manners, so that she might be able to share one of Claude's favourite subjects of inquiry, if, as had been proposed, they should determine upon going abroad for their wedding tour.

The preparations for the ball were progressing. Claude said nothing more about his journey to London; Helen never alluded to her implied promise of consulting his wish about dancing. It seemed as if both were aware that the topics were dangerous, and would bring back uncomfortable recollections. This was not quite like the hearty reconciliation after a true lovers' quarrel; but then they were going on so smoothly it seemed unnecessary to inquire whether the ground beneath their feet were hollow.

About a week before the ball a carriage drove up to the door, just as all were lingering at the luncheon table. Helen had been in particularly good spirits, laughing with Lady Louisa over a new novel, and inducing Claude to join with her. Helen's criticisms were generally very apt, and whether Claude always approved them or not, he was seldom inclined to hold out an argument against her. Miss Manners stood by with rather a frowning brow, considering light literature beneath the attention of beings who had the power of understanding science. As Helen sometimes said, her mental feast was always the *pièce de résistance*.

"Now, then, Miss Manners,"—exclaimed Maurice, slowly rising from the table, and standing in front of the fire, so as to secure the largest portion to himself, whilst at the same time he raised his eye-glass and looked towards the window.—"here is an opportunity for congeniality. My cousin Susan! the most historical, geological, mineralogical, astronomical——"

"And practical," added Claude.

"Thank you;—as Mr. Egerton observes,—and practical young lady in England. At least if she is not, she ought to be."

"Young ladies educated by mammas always are patterns," said Lady Louisa.

"Or warnings," added Maurice. "Not that I say so of Susan; forbid it Minerva, Juno, Diana, Vesta, and all the goddesses whose virtues are concentrated in the character of my aunt Fanny!"

Miss Manners laughed; for her, heartily. Generally speaking, her laugh was rather a sepulchral echo, ringing through a hollow cavern. Yet she corrected him: "You forget, Maurice; they were the Grecian deities who would have been propitious to a woman of such a cultivated mind as Mrs. Graham,—Athene, Hera, Artemis——"

"Mrs. and the Miss Grahams in the drawing-room, my lady," announced a footman, suddenly bursting in upon Miss Manners' list of Greek goddesses.

"Lady Augusta is not here," was Helen's quick reply. She stood as though she did not intend to obey the summons herself.

"You are going, Helen, aren't you?" asked Claude, with a little surprise in his tone.

"I don't know. Mamma will be there."

"But won't your aunt think it unkind?"

"And won't Miss Graham want you?" said Lady Louisa.

"Is all the counsel that we two have shared,
The sisters' vows, the hours that we have spent,
When we have chid the hasty-footed time
For parting us,—O, and is all forgot?"

Helen looked impatient. "Susan is not so foolish as to want me, when she knows I am otherwise engaged."

"Not if you are engaged," said Claude.

"I thought I was going with you for a ride."

"I thought so too; but there may be time for both."

"And no disappointment on either side," added Lady Louisa, a little maliciously. "I know Mr. Egerton is a warm admirer of Mrs. Graham, to say nothing of her daughter."

Helen was not inclined just then to hear that he was a warm admirer of any one. She waited for some seconds, in which interval Maurice and Miss Manners went away, perhaps hoping that Lady Louisa would do the same; but finding this not likely to be the case, she said, "You had better go, Claude, and we can give up the ride."

"Impossible!" said Claude.

"I don't see that; if you are so anxious to talk to my aunt."

"I can't go, if you don't," replied Claude. "Every one will be asking for you."

"Say I am tired, engaged, cold;" and Helen knelt down before the fire to warm herself.

"Helen! how can you be so perverse?" exclaimed Claude, half amused, and half vexed. "Come, you really must;" and he touched her arm.

Lady Louisa laughed. "Practising betimes:—

'For I am he, am born to tame you, Kate;
And bring you from a wild cat to a Kate
Conformable, as other household Kates.'

"I am not going," said Helen, in a more determined tone than she had used before; "or, if I do go, I sha'n't ride."

"You will think better of it, presently," said Claude, rather shortly.

"Not at all likely; we certainly can't do both."

"I don't agree with you. You could have seen your aunt, made your excuses, and dressed yourself for your ride, whilst we have been talking about it." There might have been something a little dictatorial in Claude's tone, and Helen's pouting lip showed that it aggravated her.

Lady Louisa laughed again. "Acted to the very life!

'I will be master of what is mine own:
She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house,
My household stuff, my field, my barn,
My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing.'

Claude commanded his temper, but it was with the utmost difficulty. He merely said: "Lady Louisa Stuart so well understands the part of Petruchio, that I shall leave her to bring Kate to reason;" and he walked to the further end of the room.

Lady Louisa, however, was a coward, as most troublesome and meddling persons are, and when she saw that she had roused the lion, she hastened to escape. "It is a very knotty point to settle," she said; "perhaps I had better leave it. Shall I tell Mrs. Graham you are coming?"

No reply was vouchsafed. Lady Louisa departed, and Helen rang the bell.

"Are you going to order the horses?" asked Claude. "We must make up our minds what we intend to do."

"I thought you had decided," said Helen. She watched for the opening of the door, but when the servant came she would not speak.

"*Shall we say half an hour from this time?*" asked Claude.

Interpreting Helen's silence for assent, he gave his order to saddle the horses and bring them round in half an hour.

Helen looked up impatiently. "They need not be brought round; we will send for them if we want them." The servant left the room.

Claude's closely compressed lips told a tale of struggling anger. Helen bent over the fire. Presently Claude said: "Are you going to the drawing-room?"

"Perhaps, presently."

"Shall I give any message to your aunt for you?"

"Thank you, no; I can speak for myself."

Claude went to the door, but turned round to say, in a tone of marked displeasure, "We really shall be too late for our ride if you delay,"—an observation received in silence.

It was a fit of ill-temper which had originated in a momentary feeling of perverseness on Helen's part at having her ride delayed, but was aggravated into a storm by the foolish dread of being governed. It never would have arisen where there was true love. But Helen's undisciplined feelings were at the mercy of every chance observation.

Persons usually have some image of themselves in their own minds,—some picture which they hold up before the mirror of their hearts, and which they believe is the same seen by the world. In nine cases out of ten it is not that which they actually know of themselves from conscience and self-examination,—it is a flattering likeness, yet sufficiently true to enable them to look at themselves, as it were, apart from themselves—to become, in fact, picturesque.

Now, the very commonest characters have a certain amount of picturesqueness belonging to them, when their different qualities are drawn out and put in right juxtaposition,—how much more, then, those which have a really noble and chivalrous stamp!

Helen Clare was unquestionably very picturesque, and, without being what could be termed vain, she was aware of it. She had heard of her impetuous temperament, her excitability, imagination, warmth of feeling, from infancy. "Such a dear, impulsive, variable child!" Lady Augusta used to call her, whenever the impulses and variability did not affect her own comfort; and the words were echoed by admiring friends, until Helen had grown up with the idea that these characteristics were, if not actual virtues, at least charms, like beauty and elegance. There was no attempt, therefore, to control them. They were to her like the clouds in an English sky, adding brilliancy to the landscape from

the force of contrast. And Helen was right, as far as the world was concerned. Persons who did not come in the way of the clouds, and suffer from a deluge of rain in consequence, thought them extremely beautiful; but it was very different when called upon to live in perpetual fear of them. Claude was just beginning to discover this. It was one thing to look upon Helen from a distance, as upon a dissolving view, constantly changing, and another to feel that his enjoyment depended upon her, and that, however great it might be, he could not be certain of its lasting for a single hour.

He went to the drawing-room, more really cross with Helen than he had ever yet been. Mrs. Graham and Isabella were engrossed by Lady Augusta; Susan was talking to Lady Louisa Stuart. Claude joined the latter, not from any liking to Lady Louisa, but to avoid the risk of a question from Lady Augusta as to what had become of Helen.

In his state of irritation Susan's conversation was very agreeable to him: he was little in the humour for wit or repartee; and Susan's simplicity kept Lady Louisa tolerably well in order. But Claude gave only a half attention even to his own words, until something was said about the ball; and then Lady Louisa, having a little gossiping pleasure in trying to discover whether the feeling of liking between Claude and Susan was really as slight as it appeared, said, "We shall see you here before that, of course, Miss Graham. Your counsel will be wanted on many points, as it was for the tableaux. Mr. Egerton, I am sure you agree with me."

Claude readily took up the suggestion, and replied, "Indeed, I hope it will be arranged for you to be here some days before. Helen was saying only the other day that you would be a help to every one."

"I must wait to be asked," said Susan; "besides Lady Augusta will scarcely want help."

"But Helen may want comfort," said Lady Louisa, "if, as report says, Mr. Egerton intends to betake himself to London."

"To London? Are you going away, then?" asked Susan, quickly.

"Possibly; I can't say." Claude's manner betrayed that it was a disagreeable subject.

Lady Louisa, however pursued it. "We must remember that Mr. Egerton is not now open to the temptations which beset less fortunate mortals. Having obtained a planet, he cares not to look upon the less brilliant

'Earth-trending stars that make dark heaven light.'

"Helen will be dreadfully vexed," said Susan.

Claude smiled gravely.

"You should use your eloquence, and persuade him for your cousin's sake, Miss Graham," said Lady Louisa.

"That could scarcely be of any use if Helen has failed," answered Susan. "But——" she paused, and then added, simply, "we thought perhaps, Mr. Egerton, that you could help us, and I am afraid you won't be able to do it if you are going away."

"Help you? In what way? You know I would help you to the utmost in any way." Claude's tone was eager.

Lady Louisa leaned back in her chair, and a smile slightly curled her lips.

"It is a very matter-of-fact way," observed Susan. "Mamma wants Lady Augusta to lend us her magic lanthorn for our children's party on Wednesday, and we thought you could teach us how to exhibit it properly."

Perhaps Claude did think this rather a matter-of-fact way of being useful, for he answered as if he was thinking upon something else: "It is not a difficult thing; a few minutes will put you in the way of managing it."

"Magic lanthorns are charming things, and so innocent!" observed Lady Louisa, in a very peculiar tone. Claude's keen eyes were turned to her, but she kept her face towards the door, which opened at that moment, and added, "much more innocent than balls; even Helen must own that."

Helen had just entered and Lady Louisa meant her to hear; but she went up to Mrs. Graham.

"My love where have you been?" asked Lady Augusta. "I was going to ring for you."

"I have been in the dining-room," replied Helen, bluntly. "Aunt Fanny, I ought to have come back before, but I didn't."

"Thank you, my dear, for the non-excuse; I dare say you were talking."

"No, thinking," said Helen, quickly. She looked round for Susan, but could not see her immediately. Claude was standing before her, rather bending forward. He was trying to explain something connected with the magic lanthorn. Lady Louisa had thrown herself into a different position, by which she could watch all that went on.

Susan broke off the conversation directly her cousin drew near, but Claude chose to continue it. He just waited for the few words of greeting to pass, and then he said to Susan, finishing a sentence

which he had begun : "I could call and show you what to do some evening, if you like."

Susan hesitated, and remarked that it was cold whether, and the nights were dark, and the distance was long.

"Not more than two miles," replied Claude ; "and I am out in all weathers. If I came to you early, I might be here again by seven, in time for dinner."

"Helen will think it unfair," said Susan ; just then catching a most uncomfortable expression in her cousin's face.

Helen was still standing near, pretending to be engrossed in talking to Lady Louisa Stuart.

Claude addressed her at once. "Helen I am talking of going over to Wingfield one afternoon this week, in order to show Miss Graham how to exhibit the magic lanthorn. If you could go with me, we might have the room darkened, and try it ; and ride back before it grew late."

"Magic lanthorns are shown best at night," said Helen, without looking at him. "Mamma objects to my being out after half-past five."

"Just what I was proposing to avoid," said Claude.

"Oh ! I beg your pardon, I misunderstood ; but I shall be very little help to you."

Claude suddenly turned away, and went up to Mrs. Graham. Susan looked pained ; but Lady Louisa only laughed and murmured to Helen :—

" 'I see a woman may be made a fool
If she had not a spirit to resist.'"

You are giving him a lesson in time, Helen. I dare say he will profit by it, and form no more engagements without consulting you first."

This speech recalled Helen to herself, or rather it touched her pride. She replied, half speaking to Susan : "It is a matter of convenience ; there is no use in darkening rooms, when, if you wait long enough, they will darken themselves."

"But it would be no trouble," said Susan ; "and we should like to have you with Mr. Egerton so very much."

Helen scarcely seemed to hear. Her attention was attracted by an animated discussion which was going on between Mrs. Graham and Claude, Lady Augusta and Isabella occasionally taking part in it.

"A very urgent request apparently," said Lady Louisa smiling ; "and Mr. Egerton seems well inclined to grant it. What a for-

fortunate person Mrs. Graham is to have such influence! I should have said, if I had been asked, that Mr. Egerton was not generally very yielding. What testimony does your experience give, Helen?"

"It is not fair to apply to Helen," said Susan, quickly. "And I doubt very much whether Mr. Egerton is so inclined to say yes; I know what mamma is asking." She rose and walked across the room, and Lady Augusta just then called Helen also to the conference. Lady Louisa was discomfited; she could not gratify her curiosity by following.

"Claude has been tempted to make an engagement for you, my love," said Lady Augusta to Helen, as she drew near. "It only waits your ratification."

Helen's face betokened any thing but willingness to ratify an engagement at that moment; and Claude's easy manner changed directly she approached, and he became very stiff, and seemed half inclined to contradict Lady Augusta's words.

"A great deal has been promised for you, Helen," said Mrs. Graham. "Lady Augusta says that she will trust you to us for our children's party, if you will come; and Mr. Egerton has offered to be there, and exhibit the magic lanthorn himself, instead of running the risk of our awkwardness."

"Thank you; you are very kind, but I don't know ——" Helen turned to Lady Augusta with mingled surprise and anger. "Mamma, you know I never go out without you."

"Aunt Fanny may be an exception, I hope," said Mrs. Graham, kindly; "but I should not think of troubling you with such childishness, if there were not something to offer you to make the evening pleasant."

There was a little constraint in the tone, and Helen for a moment felt ashamed of herself. But Claude stood by with that cold, impassive look, which she was just beginning to understand, and she became more irritated; and only replied, shortly, that her services could be of very little use, she was afraid, in exhibiting a magic lanthorn.

"That is naughty and perverse of you, Helen," exclaimed Susan, making an effort to laugh. "You know we only want you to exhibit yourself."

"And to be agreeable," said Lady Augusta, emphatically.

"Which she will not be if we force her against her inclination," continued Mrs. Graham, kindly; "so we won't say any thing more about it now, but leave it."

"To Claude's influence," said Lady Augusta. "He has not attempted to exercise it yet, by expressing his wish."

"Helen can scarcely require that," said Claude. He thought he had spoken gently, but he was not quite successful; and Helen became more ungracious, and turning to her aunt, said that she could not make up her mind at once; she was afraid the fatigue might be more than she could bear, as the party at Wingfield would take place so near the time fixed for the ball.

Any other person but Mrs. Graham would have been seriously offended; but she read the truth too clearly to have any feeling for herself.

Claude went with her to the carriage, but Helen's name was not mentioned by either. And Helen returned to her room congratulating herself upon her firmness in asserting the entire freedom of her own will.

Helen kept to her determination, and by so doing strengthened her ill-humour. Before the day was over, she had brought herself, by the aid of pride and Lady Louisa's inuendos, to the conviction, that Claude was purposely bent upon exercising his power over her, and that it was her duty to show him that she would act independently. A shower of rain put a final stop to the ride, but she took no advantage of the unoccupied afternoon, except to assure Claude that he was quite wrong in forming engagements for her without her consent. She was silent at dinner, and read all the evening. Claude tried to overlook her manner, not comprehending the cause of offence, and thinking that time and consideration would bring her round again. But when he found no change, he left her to herself. Such a mood could not fail to excite remark; and even Sir Henry, noticing her short replies, asked whether she was well.

"Quite well," was the reply; "nothing is the matter;" but Helen, as she said these words, thought the contrary, and looked upon herself as a martyr.

One of the last things she could have believed was, that she could be a prey to petty feelings, little jealousies, mean tempers. Persons who have what are called, great faults (great being supposed to imply noble), seldom do think so; the degradation of temper, the baseness of pride, seem never to enter into their calculations.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HELEN went to bed early and rose late ; and when she went downstairs, found every one assembled at breakfast. The letters had just been brought in. Sir Henry tossed several to Claude, exclaiming : " Business befitting your new dignity already, Claude. You must keep a secretary if you begin so early."

Claude took up his letters and looked at the directions.

" The cards of life," said Lady Louisa ; " one always has a hope that one may take up trumps."

" Or court cards at least," observed Miss Manners.

" I don't think the cards signify," remarked Lady Augusta ; " or at least only comparatively speaking. The important thing is how they shall be played."

Claude looked up from his letters, and said : " There are certain rules which if they could be kept,—at least one should have the satisfaction of knowing that one had not lost the game by one's own fault."

" You are not likely to do that, my good fellow," exclaimed Maurice ; " you seem to me to have rules at hand for all occasions."

Claude turned to Helen, who was sitting next him. " There is a rule for this occasion, at least. Here is a letter from my lawyer, saying that I must, without fail, be in town on the sixteenth. I thought it would be so." He held out the letter, and Helen took it mechanically.

" The sixteenth ! better than the seventeenth," exclaimed Lady Augusta ; " you will be down again for the ball."

Claude smiled faintly, and said : " We shall see." And Helen laid the letter on the table without any remark.

Claude was busied with his letters nearly the whole of breakfast time. Lady Louisa talked a good deal, so did Miss Manners ; but Lady Augusta showed plainly that the world was not going smoothly with her ; less, however, by what she said, than by what she did : the slices of dry toast being taken with an abstracted air, as if eating were a penance, only submitted to as a duty ; and slowly conveyed to her mouth in tiny morsels, with a languid curve of the wrist, which just served to display the whiteness and symmetry of her delicate hand.

Helen was cross, and did not try to conceal it. She shivered, and sent for a shawl ; but refused to sit near the fire, and declared

that the weather was so miserable, the only thing to be done was to take a long walk ; and then she turned to Miss Manners and asked if she would go with her.

Perhaps it was no wonder, after this, that Claude found too much occupation in his letters to allow of his mixing in general conversation.

Breakfast was ended. Claude collected his letters, so did Sir Henry. Lady Augusta addressed her husband : " My dear, are you going to your study ? I wish to speak to you."

" Certainly, certainly," Sir Henry answered, a little quickly ; " Claude, I shall want you by and by ; when shall you be at leisure."

" At any hour, sir ; I am going to walk in the colonnade." Claude glanced at Helen. She must have seen the glance, but she would not reply to it. Sir Henry, Lady Augusta, and Maurice went away.

" Shall we go out at eleven ?" said Miss Manners to Helen, as she prepared to follow them. " It may be better than waiting till the first loveliness of the day has passed. The world becomes sombre in the afternoon, and casts an oppression upon the spirits."

" I don't see where you can find any loveliness at this season," observed Lady Louisa ; " for me, I feel only ' the icy fang and churlish chiding of the winter's wind ;' and if I might venture to judge from Mr. Egerton's face he agrees with me."

Claude was lingering by the fire. He answered shortly, that it was certainly bitter weather.

" And a solitary walk in the colonnade is not likely to make you warm," observed Lady Louisa ; " you would do yourself more good by joining Helen and Miss Manners."

Claude was very sorry, but he had a particular engagement that morning, and he walked out of the room. Helen waited till he was gone,—and then moved slowly towards the door. A screen hid it, so that no one could see when she left the room.

" A first-rate Petruchio !" said Lady Louisa to Miss Manners, thinking that Helen was out of hearing. " He won't move one step forward."

" Yet I would take a bet that his Kate will be too much for him," was the reply. " I have known her from her infancy."

" So have I ; but if ever I saw determination expressed in any man's face, it is in Mr. Egerton's."

The rustling of a silk dress at the lower end of the apartment was heard ; Lady Louisa and Miss Manners looked at each other, then at the screen ; but no one appeared from behind it ; and

Helen's light step was just audible, as she glided away, and ran upstairs to her own room. Five minutes afterwards she had joined Claude in the colonnade. He was pacing it rapidly, but slackened his steps as she drew near. Helen put her arm within his, and they went on for some seconds in silence: then Helen made a commonplace remark, but received only a very cold reply. She tried a second, but its success was no greater: at length she stopped suddenly, and said: "We are not very pleasant companions to each other."

"Not at all pleasant," was the answer.

"And I may as well go in then?" said Helen.

"Not on any account, if it gives you satisfaction to be here."

"Satisfaction!" Helen angrily withdrew her arm: "Claude, is that a word to me?"

"It expresses what I mean," he replied. "You give me no reason to think that you have pleasure in being with me. I conclude therefore that you come merely as a satisfaction to your conscience."

"Claude you are unkind, aggravating;" and Helen drew herself up angrily.

"I don't want to be either, Helen; and I won't retort; though I might."

"I thought that love, *true* love," said Helen, and she laid a stress on the adjective, "was always charitable and forbearing."

"I hope it is; but it must be reciprocal, mutual love: and you must allow me to say, that within the last twenty-four hours I have had sufficient reason to doubt whether love with us is reciprocal."

"The same thought has crossed my own mind," replied Helen, stiffly.

Claude turned round suddenly and fiercely: "Doubt of my affection crossed your mind! Helen, what false spirit has suggested the idea."

Helen slightly trembled as she replied: "Dictatorial and exacting love, is not true love. If you wish for a slave, Claude, you have made a wrong choice."

Claude strode on at a pace which rendered it difficult for her to follow him; and throwing himself upon a bench at the further end of the colonnade, covered his face with his hands.

Helen felt frightened. Cold herself, she little knew the tempest of feeling which it was in her power to excite. He looked up after some moments, his complexion of an ashy paleness, and said bitterly: "There is something more in this than I understand."

"I see no mystery," replied Helen, "except that I don't suit you."

He spoke impatiently: "Let me be the judge; when you don't suit me, I will tell you."

"Yet it may be well to consider in time," said Helen, quietly.

"Helen, you madden me. Consider! yes, I do consider: and I will ask you to consider also. It is true I am exacting, not of obedience, but of confidence. As for the trifles which have brought this cloud between us, they are too miserable to need explanation; and they are not the root of the evil. I am not blind, Helen. A fancied interference with your will, and the petty sarcasm of a woman like Lady Louisa Stuart, could have no power over you if you trusted me as I deserve to be trusted. You do me wrong, base wrong."

Helen's dark, expressive eyes met his for a moment in fear, and then were bent upon the ground. He thought she reproached him for his harshness, and his manner changed into tenderness, mingled, however, with reproach. "Forgive me, dearest, forgive me; I may have been hasty and impatient with you. I am apt to be so; my manner is at times dictatorial: but can a chance word separate hearts that are truly one?"

Helen was silent; and Claude continued: "You are hard upon yourself, Helen, when you bring before me a phase of character so unlike your own real nature. Even as a child, I respected you for your truth, and generosity, and loving trust in others, and so I respect you now from the bottom of my heart. Only let me feel that you love me, and then tell me of my faults if you will. God knows, you will scarcely find more than I am ready to acknowledge."

"I was wrong," said Helen; "I ought to submit."

"No, never, if I am unjust or exacting. But surely you will forget all that; it can't need explanation, if you will only believe that I vexed you unintentionally."

Helen evaded a direct reply, for her heart was still proud. In a faltering voice she said: "If at any time I really distrust you, you will cease to love me."

"I don't know; I won't think of such a possibility."

"But change in me might make you change," continued Helen.

He paused; then said very gravely: "Only such change as I could never contemplate, — which would make me fear that you had wilfully and knowingly deceived me."

"I have not done that," replied Helen, quickly.

He laid his hand upon hers, and said, "Sooner would I believe that an angel from heaven could do it than that you could."

Helen's heart throbbed convulsively. Almost she could have said: "Yet you are deceived. I do not love you," but Claude looked at her with a glance of deep, pure, unfathomable confidence and affection, and the confession was stopped.

Before there had been time for another word, she was summoned to her father's study.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HELEN was more afraid of her father than of her step-mother, whenever any thing was really amiss or when conscience at all reproached her. Sir Henry had a frank, straightforward way of looking at all matters, and judging them, from which it was impossible to escape. It took the place of talent in many instances, and caused him to be consulted when men of very much greater powers would have been passed by.

He used no circumlocution either in his mode of address; and now as soon as Helen entered the room he began, without allowing Lady Augusta, who was present, to interpose a remark. "I want to speak to you, my dear. Your mamma and I have been talking about you. We don't understand what is the matter between you and Claude."

"There is nothing particular the matter. Claude and I do very well together," said Helen.

"Nay, my love," interrupted Lady Augusta.

"Stop, my dear, stop! Let her speak for herself. Nobody wants you to marry Claude Egerton or Claude anybody, my child, unless he is likely to make you happy. There is time enough to consider. Better draw back now than repent by and by."

"But, my dear Sir Henry, indeed — Helen, my love, your papa is only anxious, as I am, for your happiness, and we thought we saw the shadow of something not quite comfortable."

"No shadow, my dear," said Sir Henry. "They didn't speak a word to each other all yesterday evening, and they have been perfectly silent all this morning. That is reality, not shadow."

"I was not inclined to talk this morning," replied Helen.

"Just the thing I complain of. I don't understand people who

are in love not talking to each other. Your mamma says it is something about going to your aunt Fanny?"

Helen felt more ashamed than she could bear to show. It was one thing to have a petty feeling lurking in her own mind, or even brought out in the form of complaint to Claude; but it was terribly humiliating to have her folly put before her in words by her father. She replied: "I don't wish to go to my aunt's. I don't know any of the people who are likely to be there."

"Then stay at home, my dear. There is no difficulty. Does Claude wish you to go?"

"He would like it, I think," said Helen.

"Of course he would, my love," observed Lady Augusta. "His whole heart is set upon being with you. He can't bear the idea of separation even for an hour."

"He formed the plan himself though, without consulting me," said Helen, feeling herself forced to give some cause of complaint.

"But always with the idea of your falling into it," said Lady Augusta, swerving a little from the truth, yet so dexterously that no one could discover it.

The plan was in fact of her own proposing, though Claude had readily seconded it.

"Claude ought not to have mentioned it to aunt Fanny without asking me," said Helen. "He put me into a difficulty."

"And is this all? Helen, I am ashamed of you," burst forth Sir Henry.

But Lady Augusta placed her hand on his arm; and he yielded to the implied reproof, and was silent.

"My love, your father and I cannot help feeling vexed with you in this matter. It is but a trifle; yet we think you have shown yourself too much bent upon having your own way, and we wish——"

"Stop, my dear, excuse me:" Sir Henry tried to speak gently, but his impatience would show itself. "We don't wish you to do any thing, Helen, except please yourself; but you have no right to play with any man's happiness. Claude Egerton has chosen you to be his wife, and a great honour he has done you. I say it, though you are my daughter. If you must needs put yourself into an ill temper and be sulky for twenty-four hours because he wants you to do something you don't fancy, or makes an engagement without consulting you, you are not worthy of him."

Helen's pride had risen during this speech, and she replied, in her coldest and haughtiest tone, "I quite agree with you."

Lady Augusta became extremely frightened. "My dear Sir Henry, begging your pardon, you are very hard upon her. Your papa doesn't mean all he says, my love."

"Allow me to differ from you, my dear. I always try to use words which exactly express my meaning."

"Still, pray let me explain myself, Sir Henry. What I would remark to you, Helen, is this. We lament very much that any such difference should arise between Claude and you. We are sure it is only a misunderstanding ; but still it ought not to be allowed to continue, and we would suggest——"

"That you go and beg Claude's pardon," interrupted Sir Henry, "and tell him you have been a very foolish girl, and you hope he will forgive you."

"Scarcely to be expected, *that*," continued Lady Augusta. "There are faults on both sides, doubtless."

"Claude is dictatorial," murmured Helen.

"I have no doubt he is, my love. My dear Sir Henry, you must let me say that women cannot but understand these things better than men. Helen, no doubt, is right ; and Claude is rather too much bent upon having his own way. But there must be a sacrifice ; women's lives"—and Lady Augusta gave a compassionate sigh to the sorrows of her sex—"are for the most part all sacrifice. Still, where there is love,—when two hearts are so tenderly attached, as in this case,—it is a pity, it seems very grievous that a cloud, even though it may be only a passing one, should disturb the beautiful serenity of happiness."

"I don't understand what you wish me to do, mamma," said Helen, shortly.

"Go to your aunt's like a sensible girl, and say no more about it," observed Sir Henry.

"Tell dear Claude that you lament having vexed him, and that you are anxious to meet his wishes," said Lady Augusta.

"I am quite willing to go to my aunt's if it is thought right," replied Helen.

"Nonsense, child !" exclaimed Sir Henry. "No one wants to make a martyr of you."

"I must be a martyr if I am to go to such a disagreeable party," said Helen.

Sir Henry looked at her keenly, then turned to Lady Augusta : "Leave her to me, my dear ; I don't understand this." And Lady Augusta, though most unwillingly, and with an appealing glance at Helen, departed.

Sir Henry watched till the door was closed ; and then beckon-

ing to Helen to draw near, made her sit down at his feet, as she had done when a little child, and said very gravely: "Now let me hear the truth."

"You have heard it, papa."

"Not all. Helen, I must and will know whether you have quarrelled with Claude for something or for nothing."

"For nothing—nothing that can be explained that is. Papa, it is impossible for you to know what it all means."

"Not so impossible as you may think, Helen. I have never found any difficulty yet which could not be solved by truth. Speak truth, and I must understand."

"Of course!" exclaimed Helen, haughtily; "I should never speak any thing else!"

"Well then! let me have true answers to my questions. Is Claude in fault in this disagreement?"

Helen's conscience struggled with her pride; but the answer came: "No."

"Then you are in fault?"

"Yes; but——"

"No buts,—we will discuss them afterwards. If you are in fault, are you not bound to confess it?"

"Yes."

"Then will you confess it?"

"I—we have been talking together;—I think we understand each other better."

"That won't do, Helen. 'Better' is no word for people who are engaged to be married."

"I don't wish to be married," exclaimed Helen, passionately; "I have been more unhappy since I was engaged than I ever was before;" and she started up and stood before her father with a flushed cheek and sparkling, indignant eye.

Sir Henry regarded her in surprise; then he said, very slowly, "No wonder that Claude is vexed, if this is the way in which you treat him."

"It is interference which provokes me; if I were left to myself, I could do very well," continued Helen, in a more gentle tone. "Papa, you had much better leave me to manage my own affairs."

"Certainly, my dear. But one thing you must remember, that I am responsible for your happiness, and I can't help fearing for it when I see these strange tempers coming between you and Claude. If he is in the wrong, it can't be wise to trust you to him; and if you are, the least I can say is that you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Helen evidently had a great struggle with herself ; but her father's determined tone awed her, and she said, quietly, "I dare say I am pettish, sometimes ; but I have never been used to be tyrannised over."

"And you wish, then, to escape from what you call tyranny?" asked Sir Henry, sternly.

Helen had never quite brought herself to face this possibility ; she evaded a reply, and answered, that she wished Claude to understand she did not like it.

"And what you will say, then, to a wife's obedience to her husband?" inquired Sir Henry.

"I suppose I shall learn it when it is necessary," was Helen's cold answer.

Sir Henry was perplexed by her manner ; but after a moment's thought, he said, "I am not up to a woman's whims, Helen, but I won't see an honest, kind-hearted fellow sacrificed to them. If you can face your duty and perform it, well and good ! I shall see you married to Claude Egerton more willingly than I should to the first Duke in England. But if you don't love him well enough to give up a silly fancy to please him, you had much better say so at once. It will be more the part that I should like my daughter to act, and more befitting the character of a true and sensible woman, than to play the cat and mouse game you have been playing with him lately. I leave the case in your own hands, but I give you a father's advice, which you will do well not to reject. Now, kiss me, and we will be friends again ; but remember, I expect you to make up your mind to one thing or the other, and let me hear no more of such folly."

It was the first severe reproof which Helen had for years received from her father, and it surprised her so much that she did not know how to reply to it. She kissed him mechanically, and left the room without venturing upon another word.

Lady Augusta joined her before she had reached her own apartment. "My love, you are flurried. Your father has misunderstood you ; I was afraid it might be."

Helen stood willingly to receive Lady Augusta's caress. The idea of being misunderstood was grateful to her proud spirit. Lady Augusta went on ; "I feel I was wrong now in saying any thing to him of my anxiety. Men are so very dull in matters of feeling ; they have no tact. I only thought he might help me to discover what the cause of the cloud was, and that, perhaps, he might be able to prevail upon you, even better than I could,

to give up your inclination, and go to your aunt's, rather than annoy Claude."

"I am going," said Helen, speaking in the tone of a martyr about to be burnt at the stake.

"Just what I expected, my love. I felt you would. I don't think—but let me come into your room one minute, and talk the matter over." Lady Augusta opened the door of Helen's apartment, and sat down in a confidential attitude. "I was going to say, my dear child, that I don't think you, or any one brought up as you have been in such excessive retirement, can possibly enter into the extent of affection which a man like Claude must have before he makes up his mind to marry. A young girl's feelings are naturally cold in comparison; affection increases as time goes on. Women often love their husbands much more after they are married than before. Union of interests, the sense of protection, the experience of constant kindness,—all these things tend to increase their love; and very right that it should be so. Your dear father and myself, for instance, are far more to each other now than when I first consented to become his wife. It is desirable to understand this, or it may cause unhappiness."

"Claude chooses a strange way of showing his affection," said Helen.

"Rather, perhaps; and yet it is not strange; it is the way of all men. If you had known as much of them as I have, it would not surprise you. But it will all come right by and by. Just now, poor fellow, he can't bear you out of his sight: you will teach him better in time; and when he enters upon his duties as Member, he won't have leisure to be exacting."

Helen was very perverse; she did not like that notion. Lady Augusta watched the change in her expressive face, and continued in a free, rather laughing tone: "One thing, Helen, my love, we must all make up our minds to: men are selfish,—very often they don't know it,—but it is in their nature, and they will be so to the end. Claude, I dare say, was afraid of a dull evening, and, begging your aunt's pardon, it was inconsiderate to take advantage of his kindness as she did. But I saw that he repented as soon as he had said 'Yes;' and then, to make the matter more agreeable, you were brought in. For myself, I was taken by surprise. It is quite against my principles, as you know, that you should be mixed up with all your aunt's strange friends; but I did so feel for Claude, I could not find it in my heart to refuse; and then, when I looked at you, I found I had done quite wrong. You must forgive me, my love. It is really a difficult

part which I have to play. But dear Claude's engrossing love—that was the thing I felt I had to consider first, and that it was which made me so uneasy, and induced me to apply to your father. Very unwisely, I quite own now,—yes, very unwisely ;” and Lady Augusta ended her explanation with a deeply penitent sigh.

“It has been a great fuss about nothing,” said Helen.

“Yes, perhaps so ;—however, it will all be right now, and Claude is really behaving most admirably ; trying to remember his duty to every one. I suppose he has told you that he is going to the Admiral's this afternoon, for a couple of days.”

“To stay ! Going away !” repeated Helen, changing colour rapidly.

“Didn't you know it, my love ? But no, now I remember, the note came whilst you were talking to your father. I never saw a poor fellow more really disappointed, and yet bearing it all so well. As he said to me, to have two days away from you now, and then that stupid evening at Wingfield, and obliged to go to town on the sixteenth, was really too trying.”

“I am glad he can care about it, at any rate,” said Helen.

Lady Augusta laughed. “Now really, my dear Helen, I must scold you. You only want to be flattered, and told how miserable poor Claude is. I think the best thing I can do is to send you to him to comfort him.”

Helen was silent. She had taken off her bonnet and shawl, and was standing before the glass arranging her hair.

“If you tell him he will see you at your aunt's it will soften the disappointment immensely,” continued Lady Augusta. “I tried to persuade him that he need not go to the Admiral's.”

“And why must he go ?” inquired Helen.

“Why, as he says, there was a positive engagement when he first came to us ; and if the Admiral had not been so ill, he must have paid his visit some time ago. It won't do to offend the old man, he is so crotchety.”

“Two days !” repeated Helen to herself, musingly. It was not quite clear to Lady Augusta whether there was relief or regret in the tone.

“Which will be cheered by the prospect of the evening at Wingfield,” continued Lady Augusta. “Just fancy what it will be to him to be condemned to Susan's prosaics, without you to enliven him.”

Helen moved a few steps towards the door.

“He is waiting to see you in your morning room,” continued

Lady Augusta. "I told him that I would send you to him, that he might break the bad news to you."

Helen thought—hesitated—and just then Claude's step was heard in the gallery.

"A very few words will comfort him," said Lady Augusta.

And Helen went. Tears were in her eyes, sincere tears of vexation with herself, and regret for him. She said the "few words," which expressed affection, but were called forth by many other feelings; and Claude received them with gratitude and deep tenderness.

She was happy till Claude said, "Oh Helen! nothing can long trouble me whilst you are true;" and then a pang shot through her heart, and she went back to her room repeating to herself; "I don't mean to deceive him. Men naturally show their feelings in these cases more than women do; and, as mamma says, it will be all right when we are married."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"I BEG to deliver my testimony that Shakspeare is a true oracle, and that 'the course of true love never does run smooth,'" exclaimed Lady Louisa Stuart, seating herself at her work-frame, two days after Claude had left Ivors.

"May I have the benefit of your experience?" asked Miss Manners, laying down a book of German philosophy. "I have been attentively studying the phases of the disease presented to me during the last few weeks, but have not satisfied myself whether it has been progressing, or the contrary."

"Oh! I leave the malady," replied Lady Louisa; "all I contend for is, that if love runs smoothly for lovers, it runs just in the contrary way for every one else. Can there be any thing more oppressive than the society of a person who thinks it his duty to be so devoted to one individual that he must never spare a thought for any one else. Ivors has been quite a different place since that melancholy Jacques departed."

"Fair Helen keeps up her spirits wonderfully," observed Miss Manners. "No loss of appetite, no sighs, only a most bright and agreeable flow of spirits, very unusual."

"Freedom to follow her own sweet will," exclaimed Lady Louisa.

"She cannot love
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self-endear'd."

Miss Manners shook her head oracularly. "I give no opinion ; only if I were Mr. Egerton——"

"You would not have the tooth-ache," said Lady Louisa, laughing. "Yet remember, — 'Every one can master a grief but he that has it.'"

"Nevertheless, Helen seems to have learned to submit the independent strength of her own mind to the power of his," observed Miss Manners. "The Wingfield question is yielded."

"Yes ; I never doubted that Petruchio would win the day. But submission goes against the grain."

"All obedience would, with her," observed Miss Manners.

"I am not so sure of that, if——" Lady Louisa paused, and put on an air of mystery ; then murmured to herself,—

" 'The ides of March are come.
Ay, Cæsar ; but not gone.' "

Miss Manners looked for an explanation, but received none ; and the entrance of Helen, dressed in readiness to set out for Wingfield, interrupted the conversation.

"Prepared for the sacrifice, I see," was Lady Louisa's greeting. "You look most properly resigned, Helen."

"I wonder if the carriage is come round," said Helen, ringing the bell. Annette told me it was."

"And we shall see you again at what hour to-morrow, my dear?" inquired Miss Manners.

"I don't know ; it depends upon circumstances."

"Not very communicative," observed Lady Louisa. "But I suppose you reserve yourself for Petruchio's orders." Lady Louisa had insisted upon calling Claude, *Pétruchio*, ever since she had found a fair occasion for giving him the name. She fancied it was witty. Helen showed that she was irritated more by her manner than her words : she replied, coldly, that she supposed the carriage would be sent for her after luncheon on the following day.

"You will make yourself charming to the aborigines, I have no doubt," continued Lady Louisa. "Imagine their delight ! A creature from a new sphere dropped down amongst them ! They really are too fortunate."

"I dare say they are very like the rest of the world, and won't think about me," said Helen.

"But you will think about them, my dear," observed Miss Manners. "I know nothing more interesting than the fresh glimpses of mind and feeling one meets with in a new society."

"And fresh manners can be studied also," observed Lady Louisa. "Though Petruchio would scold me for saying so."

Helen drew on her gloves, and walked out of the room.

"She does not like it," continued Lady Louisa, laughing. "Conscience doth make cowards of us all;" but she will feel I have named him rightly before long, or I am very much mistaken."

"So much the worse," was the reply. "I can never look forward with satisfaction to seeing that noble, independent spirit of hers crushed."

"You like it, do you? Well, so do I, at a distance. It is a very effective character."

"And a very attractive study!"

"Yes," was Lady Louisa's doubtful answer. She had a secret misgiving as to Helen's attractions, especially when she had made her angry.

Helen did not return to the drawing-room to wish her friends "good-bye." She said "good-bye" to no one, but waited in her own room for the carriage, and, when it was announced, jumped into it, and told the coachman to drive as fast as he could to Wingfield. At the point where a lane lead from the Ivors road to the Lodge, she looked out for Claude, with a feeling which ended—when she found that he was not watching for her—in something like relief at being a little longer alone, mingled with pique at the conviction that he did not think it worth while to meet her, though she had written, at his request, to tell him the hour at which she was likely to pass.

The last two days had been days of freedom to Helen;—she could not say of happiness, for they had been dull, rather in the old way. Wingfield, if it was nothing else, was a little excitement; and she roused herself, and looked about her when she entered the town, wondering whether any of the odd people she saw were likely to be at her aunt's.

She found Mrs. Graham waiting for her at the door, having seen the carriage enter the sweep. Helen was ashamed not to be able to say more truly that she was glad to come, when they were all so glad to see her. She expressed what she could, which was less than she really felt; for, in trying to be true, she now and then overshot the mark, especially when she was at all out of humour. Isabella and Anna saw this directly, and went back to the study disappointed. Susan and Mrs. Graham had an instinct which told them that it was something in Helen herself rather than in them which was amiss. Susan took Helen upstairs to a little room next to her own; there was something refreshing, to

Helen's eye, in its extreme simplicity,— the freshness and whiteness, which might have made it look cold, only there was such a clear, blazing fire to brighten it. Helen sat down in a low easy chair, and said, "How comfortable!" and breathed a sigh of inward satisfaction at the consciousness that Lady Louisa Stuart and Miss Manners were quite two miles off. Susan unfastened the strings of her bonnet, took off her shawl, and kissed her, and said, "I have been afraid from the beginning that you would not come."

"Why not? I sent you word I would."

"Yes; but it was not quite a hearty consent, and I fancied you would retract."

"How did you find out it was not hearty?"

"How could one help doing so with you, who never hide anything?"

"Not hide any thing? Susan, what injustice!"

"You may try to hide, but you don't succeed. Every one likes you all the better for it, dear Helen."

"But I don't like myself; it is undignified; and I have hidden a great deal."

"Yes, no doubt; every one must. But to hide is not your nature, as it is that of some people. Perhaps, though, I discover more than others would, because we have known each other so many years."

"And you were not vexed with me because I didn't want to come this evening?" said Helen.

Susan could scarcely refrain from a smile at the unreserved acknowledgment implied in the question. She thought for a few seconds, and then said, "I was vexed, but it was not for myself."

"You thought I ought to have been glad to come to meet Claude."

"It would have been natural."

Helen was silent; and Susan added, "But you are come now, and it is all right."

Helen repeated the word right, pondering upon it; then she said, "Susan, what do you do to keep yourself always in good humour?"

"I can't answer, because I am not always in good humour."

"But when people are irritating?"

"There are a good many ways," said Susan, rather gravely.

"Don't be afraid; say them out; I am in a humour for a sermon."

"Which I don't think I am," replied Susan; "I have so many other things to think about."

"That is untrue, Susan ; sermons are never out of your head."

"Really, Helen, you profess to know much more about me than I know of myself."

"I see it in every thing you do. Tell me now how you manage."

"It depends upon the cause of the irritation," said Susan. "Very often the fault is one's own."

"That makes the matter worse," replied Helen.

"In a certain way, but it puts it more in one's own power to deal with it. And, Helen, generally speaking, I don't think one should be irritated if it were not for the wrong in oneself. One might be sorry, or even seriously displeased, but not irritated."

"But one can't be seriously displeased with a fly when it buzzes about one's ears," said Helen.

Susan laughed and answered, "Yet it would scarcely be worth one's while to be out of temper with it."

"Granted ; but how would you help it ?"

"I should try to think it was a little annoyance sent on purpose to teach me patience ! and then, I think, the irritation would cease."

"Yes, that might do" — Helen spoke earnestly ; "but it would require long practice."

"Very long, — a lifetime : so I have no right to preach a sermon about it, having only just begun."

"But if the fly were a human fly, and buzzed on purpose ?"

"I should run away if I could ; and if not——" Susan paused. "Perhaps those little trials are meant to teach us to pray at the moment to be able to bear them, and so to make religion part of our daily life."

Helen spoke again, still more earnestly : — "But if you felt that you ought not to be irritated, and that any other person in your place would not be ?"

"Then, Helen, dear, surely one ought to try and find out the cause."

"Yes, if one dared," said Helen ; her voice sank as she said the words. After a moment's silence she started up : "I have had enough of preaching now ; I am come to help you ; — what can I do ?"

"Come into the dining-room and dress the Christmas tree. I forgot, though ; you have dined, I hope."

"Why, yes ; when I was told that I could have no dinner here, of course I took advantage of luncheon at home. But, Susan, how can you all put yourselves out of your way, as you do, for a *children's party* ?"

"We don't," said Susan. "It is our way to be put out of our way, and so it comes quite naturally. You don't think we care for not having a regular dinner, do you?"

"Not if the cause is 'tanti,' as Maurice says," replied Helen. "But a number of children!"

"The most satisfactory cause of all; one is sure to give them pleasure."

"Yes; but so you would if you bought them a quantity of buns, or gave them a shilling a-peice."

"I don't agree with you there. Children feel heartiness even more than grown-up people. They show it by the instinct they have in discovering who are fond of them."

"And they forget it too," said Helen.

"The details, but not the general impression. All the Wingfield children—I mean those we know—look to mamma as a friend."

"She does not mean to adopt them all, does she?" asked Helen, ironically.

"Not quite. But she always says it is impossible to tell the influence for good those early impressions of kindness may have. And besides, for oneself, too——"

Helen interrupted her. "That is beyond me, quite;—the notion of its being good for oneself, except as scourging and fasting might be good in the way of penance! But I don't think that is quite what you mean."

Susan laughed. "Certainly I don't feel to-day very much in the mood for either one or the other. But can't you really understand, Helen, the good—I don't mean good in a moral sense—but the help and comfort it is to have interests out of one's own family?"

"Y-e-s,—I can't say,—I suppose I have never tried."

"When one is worried—out of spirits," continued Susan, and her colour changed a little—"it will happen, you know, sometimes,—there is such inexpressible comfort in feeling that one has others to live for besides one's own wretched self."

"I can imagine it if one had to go and nurse a person who is ill," said Helen. "But magic lanthorns and games are such trifling things. You must let me say it, Susan."

"But they may open the doors which let one in when great things are needed," said Susan. "You would think so if you knew how all kinds of people come to mamma when they are in trouble, because she has made them feel at home with her by little attentions when there was nothing the matter. And I have

heard her say many times, that the first thing which roused her out of her grief when papa died, was the feeling that as she had one great claim taken from her in her own home, more would be required of her out of it."

"She is very wonderful to me," said Helen; "she is not at all like the people one hears of, who are running about after charitable societies and leaving their children to governesses."

"When mamma runs she takes us with her," said Susan. "And I have been—oh! so thankful for it, Helen."

Helen sat in silent thought; then she said: "If I had the care of children, I would never bring them up as I was brought up; but I should be afraid of Aunt Fanny's way. I don't know what I should do. Leave them to their fate, I suppose. Kiss me, Susan, and forgive me; I am very glad now that I came." And they went downstairs.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HELEN was still more glad before the afternoon was over. Simple, easy work for others, in which self could not possibly have a share, was new and pleasant to her, and brought out all the best parts of her character. She laughed at herself for the amusement which she confessed could be found in hanging markers, pincushions, balls, purses, and bon-bons on the branches of a tiny tree; and wondered at her own interest in the children for whom they were designed, and whose histories Isabella, having a considerable talent in making every-day incidents look romantic, took pains to relate. There was something very agreeable, also, in feeling that her presence was a new element which gave life to others. Susan, she knew, was always glad to see her; but Isabella and Anna were in general indifferent; whereas now they assured her, again and again, that it was delightful to have her, and they were charmed she came, they had never liked dressing a Christmas tree so much,—with various other innocent little flatteries,—very different from the laboured praise and obtrusive deference offered her in her own home. Moods, irritations, all were for the time forgotten, all—until the bell rang, and Isabella, with a smile which she tried to control, said, "That must be Mr. Egerton, he told us he would come early."

"A message from the pastrycook, Miss Graham," said Martha,

looking into the room. "Would you be good enough to see if he has sent biscuits enough?" And Susan, who superintended the housekeeping arrangements, obeyed the summons.

"Helen, you have tied that little basket so near the taper it is not safe," said Anna, pointing to Helen's last work. The basket was untied. Helen let it fall upon the table, sat down, and said she was tired.

"You had better come into the drawing-room and lie down a little," said Isabella; but Helen refused.

"How foolish you were, Isabella, to think that it was Mr. Egerton," said Anna. "He won't certainly be here till six."

Anna hated romance, and was always a little cross with persons who were engaged to be married.

The bell rang again. "That is he; I hear his voice," observed Isabella, after a few seconds; and she listened.

"It is the butcher's boy," said Anna, giving a twist to a piece of string. "Mamma had an order for him which was forgotten this morning."

"It is some strange voice," said Isabella. "I know it now; it is the Admiral's man-servant."

Helen changed colour, and Isabella pushed a bottle of salts towards her. Susan came in, looking as though she were the bearer of some uncomfortable news.

"Is any thing the matter? I am sure there is something the matter!" exclaimed Isabella.

"Mr. Egerton can't come, he is gone to London," said Susan. "He had a telegraphic message from his lawyer, saying that he must be in town to-morrow before eight o'clock, so there was nothing to be done but to set off immediately. He has been so thoughtful about us; he has actually sent to Dollington for a man who can exhibit the magic lanthorn. The servant brought a parcel for you, Helen, a book, I think. Martha has taken it to your room, she thought you were there."

Helen left the room without speaking.

There was silence as by one consent till she was out of hearing. Then Isabella said, "Poor darling! what a disappointment for her!"

"If it be a disappointment," replied Anna. "I doubt though if we shall not be the greater sufferers. The Dollington man won't be half as good as Mr. Egerton. It is certainly excessively provoking."

"Oh, Anna, how shocking! Susan, do scold her," said Isabella.

"For not having learnt discretion?" inquired Susan, with a faint smile.

"For always doubting, as she does, whether people love each other," replied Isabella.

"I don't doubt it at all," said Anna. "I only say that being in love is a very odd thing, and makes people very disagreeable ; and that is why I don't think Helen is in love, because she is not disagreeable."

"But she is engaged to be married," said Isabella. "She must be in love."

"Well ! yes. I always forget that."

"But you ought not to forget it, Anna, dear," said Susan. "Really now and then you frighten me by what you say, and the way in which you look when any thing is said about it."

"Do I ? I don't intend to look ; only thoughts will come out, — and Helen is the very oddest girl I ever saw. If I were Mr. Egerton I would not marry her, — no, not if you were to give me a thousand pounds for every minute I had to live with her."

"You will be caught yourself some day, Anna," said Isabella, "and then you will understand it all better."

"Perhaps I shall ; I don't profess to be wiser than other people ; but one thing I know, that I couldn't marry any man whom I didn't think as superior to myself as — heaven is to earth, I was going to say, only perhaps Susan will call it exaggeration ; and if I did think him so superior, I could no more fret and play with him, and torment him, as Helen does Mr. Egerton, than I could fly."

"People have different notions about what is requisite for happiness in marriage," said Susan, quietly.

"Vastly different," replied Anna ; "and a very happy thing too. There are not above half a dozen men and women in the world that would marry, if persons thought as I do."

"And you know so well what is needed," said Susan, ironically.

"You may laugh, Susan ; but you think the same at the bottom of your heart. Just consider what one should require : principles, up in the clouds and never coming down ; plenty of talent, perfect temper, large mindedness, manners which would never offend your taste — oh ! loads of things besides ! and nothing frightfully ugly."

A hand was laid on Anna's shoulder, and Mrs. Graham's voice said, "Some one created on purpose for you, my child."

"Oh mamma !" Anna blushed and laughed ; "but you understand. How could one love with that sort of love any one who wasn't perfect ?"

"Perfect in will, my darling. We have no right to expect more."

Susan turned to her mother eagerly: "Thank you, dear mamma; you always know how to put one's thoughts into words."

Anna considered a minute, and said, "He would aggravate me very much if he wasn't perfect in action too."

And Isabella, added in a low voice, "Where one loves very dearly, one is blind to faults."

Mrs. Graham's comment was short. "Love in theory and love in practice are no doubt very different; but it is well, in this as in all things, to have the right theory. If we expect too much, we become cynical; and if we expect too little, we lower the tone of our own minds. Therefore, Susan, having to choose between the opinions of the three princesses, I decide for you."

CHAPTER XL.

THE parcel was lying upon Helen's table: She thought she knew its contents. Claude had carried away from Ivors a book which he thought she might want. But there would certainly be a note within. Yes, not only a note, but a thick letter. Her heart beat quickly with undefined dread. Yet she did not realise what there was to fear. She fancied that disappointment at Claude's absence was the cause of her unwonted nervousness. She broke the seal, and even then she paused, as though summoning all her energy to meet some foreseen evil. She tore it open, and devoured, rather than read, the following words:—

"My dearest Helen,"—[A cold beginning for Claude, but Helen did not stop to think about it,]—"I have had a grievous disappointment,—a sudden summons to London. If I do not go to-night, I shall miss seeing a person whom it is of the utmost consequence that I should see. My chief thought has, of course, been of you. I can provide a substitute for myself, as far as Mrs. Graham's party is concerned; but I cannot help being selfishly vexed at missing the evening with you. Yet I should be happier, ten thousand times happier, if I could be quite certain that the vexation would be shared. It is a relief to me to take this opportunity of repeating what has been pressing upon my mind more and more since we have been parted. In that most painful conversation, which you can scarcely have forgotten, I told you that I could not but doubt whether my affection was reciprocated; and you replied by retaliating the suspicion, but gave no answer to it. It is not, I trust, wrong to feel that some answer is required.

Whatever else may have passed between us since, on that one point, the foundation of all, a cloud still rests ; and you will scarcely blame me for saying, that until it is cleared away my heart can know no rest.

"Helen, I am writing coldly, but God knows the effort which it costs me. Only believe that I do it with a purpose. I have no wish to bias you by any expression of my own feelings. If I know any thing of the working of the human heart, I have often forced you into a confession of affection belied by the truthfulness of your own nature : and I wish to do so no more. You cannot doubt my love ; you may as well doubt the warmth, and light, and life-giving power of the sun. But I would pray you, solemnly, earnestly, as in the presence of Him before whom our binding vows must be made, to examine into your own.

"I urge the inquiry upon the highest grounds, because upon them alone a Christian's judgment should be made. But I would speak to you also of your own happiness.

"When first you gave me the promise which made earth a paradise, too bright it may be for my safety,—you told me that your love did not equal mine ; yet I was contented, because I believed that in owning that I was not indifferent to you, you were acknowledging the germ of a feeling which must eventually ripen into love. I was willing, therefore, to wait for it. But I have been mistaken ; at least if I may judge from words, and looks, and manner. I repel rather than attract you ; and if this is so under present circumstances, how will it be when we are married ? Can I make you happy ? Love I will give you, pure, deep, unwavering, unbounded ; but if the love which I offer now does not satisfy you, how will it be sufficient for you hereafter ?

"I pray you to ask yourself the question, putting aside every thought of my anguish, every regret for the brief duration of my happiness,—a happiness which but to have known for a few weeks will be a source of thankfulness to God for ever,—and looking only upon that which your own heart requires. If you cannot love me, Helen, reject me. I will bless you for it, because you will save yourself from a lifelong bitterness. I do not seek for an immediate answer. I wish you to decide under no excitement, no constraint. One thing only I would say for myself. You think me exacting and imperious. I believe I am both by nature ; but trust yourself to me as my wife, and the highest energy of my nature shall be exerted in the hourly struggles which, through God's grace, will make me gentle and tender, as he ought to be to whom such a treasure has been confided.

"I commit my fate to you with unbounded confidence. Whatever your determination may be, I shall feel that it is that of a true and generous heart, and no shadow of blame shall ever through me be cast upon you. And now, farewell. Ask of me what you will, except that I should no longer love you. One change only could effect that change in me: when light has been turned into darkness, and truth converted into falsehood, then, and not till then, will the foundation of my affection be removed, and I shall cease to be,

"Yours, for ever,

"CLAUDE EGERTON.

"It is just possible that I may conclude my chief business to-morrow. I should then try to return for a few days, and go back to London again; but the probability is that I may be detained much longer."

The guests were beginning to arrive, punctual and early, as such little visitors always are. Isabella was taking off cloaks and boas in one room; Anna, in another, was talking as much nonsense as she could think of to merry boys, and showing pictures to shy girls; Susan was superintending the preparations for the magic lanthorn,—whilst Mrs. Graham was to be found in Helen's room, or rather standing before Helen's door, asking for admittance. It was delayed for some seconds; and when granted, Helen was found in her morning dress, her face pale, her eyes swollen with tears.

Claude's letter lay open upon the table.

Helen's first words were an apology. "Aunt Fanny, you are come to scold me. I will be ready in two minutes." The light tone might have deceived any one who had not looked at Helen's face.

Mrs. Graham answered in the same way. "You have been neglected, I am afraid, my love, in the confusion; we all forgot that you are unaccustomed to wait upon yourself. Susan shall come to you now."

"Not until——Aunt Fanny I had rather be alone a little longer." Helen nearly broke down before the sentence was ended.

Mrs. Graham kissed her. "You have had a great disappointment, my darling; so have we all."

Helen gulped down her tears, and looked in her aunt's face with an expression so anxious, so pleading for help and counsel, Mrs. Graham could not understand it.

"You are fretted, my love, and worn; perhaps you had better remain quiet! Come down an hour hence if you like it; the children will be thoroughly amused with the magic lanthorn till then."

Helen turned away.

"It seems hard to have asked you to come when we had only one temptation to offer," continued Mrs. Graham, "and now to find that it is taken away."

"But it is not that; aunt Fanny—Oh! if I had only one friend who knew me!"

Mrs. Graham's eye involuntarily glanced at Claude's letter. Helen perceived it, and added, with instant self-command, "But I shall be better presently. If you will leave me, I will ring when I want any one to fasten my dress. I can manage all the rest. Indeed, I would rather be left."

Mrs. Graham lingered, hesitated, and then said, "You will have a friend soon, I trust, Helen, to know and help you always."

Helen's lip quivered, and two large tears rolled slowly down her cheek. Yet she again repeated, "I would rather be left." Mrs. Graham went to the door, but before reaching it, she turned round and said, "Helen, darling, though you can't talk to me, perhaps you can write. Some persons find that much easier;" and Helen threw her arms round her aunt's neck, and whispered, "You are like my own mother; I could talk to you if I could to any one." And then the door was closed, and Helen was once more left to her own thoughts.

And what were they? She could not have told herself. Claude's letter had thrown no light upon her secret feelings, or rather it had only added to the obscurity in which even in her own eyes they were involved, by placing him before her in the point of view most attractive to her best impulses.

If he had urged his love, she would have turned from it with the painful consciousness of her own coldness; but when he spoke of her happiness, he recalled the grounds upon which she had originally been tempted to accept him, reminded her of Lady Augusta's arguments, her father's confidence, the world's admiration, and added to it a deepening and clearer conviction that in generosity and unselfishness Claude Egerton's equal could scarcely be found.

Free, Helen might at that moment have learnt to love Claude; but bound—pledged—it was a fatal mistake: and once more at the thought of being united to him for ever, the cold chill of indifference crept over her.

CHAPTER XLI

MERRY were the shouts of the children below, but the sound scarcely reached Helen's ears. Susan was sent away when she came, offering to assist her cousin in dressing. Mrs. Graham was not admitted, when she knocked at the door, to beg that if Helen's head ached she would not attempt to come down stairs. Unused to self-control, untaught to think of others, Helen never realised to herself that she was throwing a damp over the general gaiety, by giving way to her own sad and perplexing thoughts. "They can do very well without me," was the salve which soothed her conscience; and it was only when at length her fire had burnt low, and the room was growing cold, that she roused herself to dress, and, with a feeling of painful effort and repugnance, summoned resolution to join the party.

The children were gathered round the Christmas tree, loud in admiration and wonder; Anna and Isabella marshalling them in order, that they might see every thing; whilst Charlie kept guard over old Miss Harvey and her sister, whom he had escorted with no little pride through the streets, and who were to be taken back again with all care as soon as their curiosity was satisfied.

Helen paused in the door-way, the servants who crowded it making way for her to pass on. There were a few grown-up people near; mammas, elder sisters, and governesses, who had the charge of the little ones; and amongst these she stood, as she hoped unnoticed. She heard their remarks.

"A beautiful tree! so well lighted; and such trouble must have been taken in dressing it! but Mrs. Graham remembers every thing and every body." "It must be very pleasant to be able to give so much pleasure." "Mrs. Graham has such help in her daughters. How nice they look this evening! I have heard Susan called pretty; but I don't think she is that,—it is only expression. Yet, just look at her now. What a bright look! she never can have known much sorrow." "No; a little while ago some one said she was quite altered; but I don't see it. It was at the time the report got about that she was to marry Mr. Egerton."

The last words were spoken by Miss Gaunt, an elderly lady, quick, shrewd, strongly inclined to satire, the daughter of one of the former rectors of Wingfield; and they were addressed to Mrs. Berry, the wife of the present rector, a sensible, straightforward, middle-aged mother of a large family, who had a dread of gossip,

and was aware that Miss Gaunt and her sister did not share the distaste. The remark was received, therefore, coldly; and Mrs. Berry endeavoured to divert the subject by some reference to the children. But Miss Gaunt renewed it: "It all came to nothing, as every one knows; but I could not help wishing that it had been true. I should so very much like to see dear Susan married; and they say that Mr. Egerton is such a very excellent man."

"He will make a good husband then for any one," said Mrs. Berry, forced into a general observation.

"Well, yes; but it does seem a pity that he should throw himself away. He might do so much good."

"But he will, we trust."

"That is as time may show. Not if he takes after Ivors. What is the neighbourhood the better for the Clares?"

"Hush! some one said Miss Clare was here."

Helen was going to speak to Mrs. Berry, and stop the conversation, but another lady edged herself in between them, and prevented it. She heard Miss Gaunt reply:

"Miss Clare! oh! she is too fine to come down; Susan Graham told me half an hour ago, that she was not ready. I wonder Lady Augusta has allowed her to be here this evening."

"Mr. Egerton was to have exhibited the magic lanthorn; I suppose that was the reason," replied Mrs. Berry.

"No doubt! Poor young man! Well! I must say I think he might have made a better choice. They say he has been quite taken in by Lady Augusta."

Helen felt her colour rise; she longed to move, but it was impossible. Miss Gaunt continued: "However, he has a will of his own; one hears that through his servants; and when once they are married, and he is away from Ivors, it may be better. Those Clares are enough to ruin any one with their exclusiveness."

"Those Clares!" Helen instinctively put out her hand, and all but touched Miss Gaunt's arm to remind her that she was near.

Mrs. Berry remarked that Sir Henry was one of the first men in the county.

"Because he is the member, I suppose, you mean; but one puts that aside; mere political influence is nothing."

"And he is a good landlord," said Mrs. Berry.

"I dare say. Indeed I have heard that he is respected by the farmers."

"And he is a liberal man, too," observed Mrs. Berry.

"Yes, in a certain way. As I heard some one observe the

other day. You always see subscription lists headed by Clares ; as you see benevolent institutions patronised by the Queen."

Mrs. Berry spoke as if she was annoyed: "Really, my dear Miss Gaunt, you are a little too severe. Perhaps Mr. Berry and I have as much right to speak about Sir Henry Clare's liberality as any persons, because so much of his charity passes through our hands: a kinder-hearted man there can't be."

"My dear Mrs. Berry, I don't mean to doubt it. All I say is, that if Sir Henry Clare's bailiff managed his property, and if Lady Augusta's housekeeper took care of the Hall, and Lady Augusta, and Miss Clare, and the whole set were transported to the antipodes, the neighbourhood would not be one whit the worse off; and there would not be half a dozen regrets for their departure. I speak from what I know; and I hear a great deal one way and another."

Mrs. Berry could bear this no longer. She managed to move forward, so as to escape any more of Miss Gaunt's observations; and Helen moved likewise, and was seen by Susan, and summoned to admire the Christmas tree.

It was a very painful feeling which came over her as she emerged from the little crowd in the doorway, and felt that all eyes were directed towards her with curiosity. An hour before she would not have thought about herself at all; now there was an uncomfortable self-consciousness, a sensation of being apart, different from every one, being looked upon with suspicion. "Those Clares!" "Taken in by Lady Augusta!" The expressions haunted her; though she scarcely realised their full meaning, especially as regarded Claude. But she felt as though she were among enemies; and became cold and stiff, even to the children, who of course, became cold and stiff to her in return: and so there was a little restraint creeping over the party, which Helen knew would be attributed to herself. She had not the spirit or the heart to alter her manner; she, who had all her life been amused, had no idea of amusing others; and at last, one by one, the children withdrew from the tree, and she was left standing near it alone with Susan.

"We must take the presents off, and distribute them, Susan," said Anna, coming up to them. "The children have been looking long enough."

"Yes; in one minute. Helen, you will help?" But Helen declined.

"But you must; a great many of the names are in your writing."

"I can't always read my own writing, and I forget the names."

"Never mind!" exclaimed Anna, impatiently, "if she doesn't choose to do it."

And Helen drew back into a distant corner, solitary and heavy hearted.

"Helen! my love, there is a lady wishing very much to be introduced to you," said Mrs. Graham, coming up to her: "a cousin of Mr. Egerton's," was added in a lower voice.

Helen's face flushed. "I had rather not, Aunt Fanny. Must I? I don't know her."

"She is staying in the neighbourhood, and would like it."

"What are the children going to do now?" asked Helen, abruptly.

"To dance, I think, in the next room. Susan will manage for them."

"She is so kind to them. Must I go too? I would much rather sit here; my head aches."

"You shall do just as you like, my love; you don't look well."

"Susan likes it, I suppose," said Helen, in a wondering tone; whilst she watched her cousin marshalling the children, and telling them which way they were to go."

"She likes giving pleasure, as every one does."

"And she is always bright," said Helen.

"She has even spirits; that is her great blessing."

"And you like it, Aunt Fanny, don't you?"

"Yes; but in a different way from Susan. But every one likes it, Helen, that tries it. Will you come with me?"

Helen held her aunt's hand. "Don't leave me, Aunt Fanny; it is a pleasure to talk to you."

"My love, I must; and my friend is waiting for me, and for you too."

"Does she know about me?" Helen's voice trembled.

"She hopes you are to be a new cousin before very long."

"I can't; I can't."

Mrs. Graham looked round. The room was empty.

"Aunt Fanny, I can't," repeated Helen.

"Can't what? my child?"

"Be introduced. You don't understand."

"No, indeed, dearest. But if it is only shyness, you ought not to give way to it."

Helen stood up, then sat down again; and after a moment's pause, drew forth Claude's letter, put it into her aunt's hand, and *rushed away* to her own room.

CHAPTER XLII.

It was eleven o'clock before the guests were gone. Then there were various matters to be arranged by Susan, Isabella, and Anna; lights and fires to be extinguished, music to be put away, something like order restored to the rooms, to say nothing of the time spent in discussing the pleasure of the evening,—the children's amusement, their curious remarks, the little tempers and fancies which had been exhibited. One drawback was acknowledged by all. Even Susan owned that she was disappointed in Helen. She had given her credit for greater self-command; but people in love, she supposed, were to be judged by a different standard from others: a remark to which Anna, as usual, replied by a sweeping censure upon all persons in that unhappy condition.

And in the meantime, Helen herself was waiting anxiously, yet with comparative calmness, in her own apartment, for the interview with her aunt which she knew would be given her before the evening was over. She was calm, because she believed that she had now placed the determination of her fate out of her own hands; and even the suspense of the time which must intervene before Mrs. Graham could be expected to have leisure to attend to her, was nothing compared with the painful indecision which had confused, and in a degree paralysed, her power of thought and reason before.

Yet when the gentle footstep was at length heard, her heart beat so rapidly that she could scarcely say, "Come in;" and when her aunt entered, she stood up to receive her, but did not utter a word.

Mrs. Graham had Claude's letter in her hand. She laid it before Helen without pause or preface, and said, "I have read it, my love, and thank you for it."

Helen's large, eager eyes rested for a moment with painful earnestness upon her aunt's face; then they were bent upon the ground; and in a low voice she said, "And you think he is right?"

Mrs. Graham, without at once answering, drew Helen gently towards her, and made her sit down; and kissing her fondly, said, "Yes, he is quite right, for his own happiness and for yours."

"I can't answer him," said Helen; still not daring to look up.

"That may be the best answer," replied Mrs. Graham. "If it were all right between you, there would be no difficulty."

"And I must tell him so," said Helen, in a hollow voice.

"You must be true to him and to yourself, my love."

"And I have deceived him, and mamma, and every one ; and I must be lowered in his eyes. Aunt Fanny, help me ; I can't do it."

"There is no degradation, my child, like the slightest shade of falsehood. But you must not take what I have said too literally, and act upon it hastily. Claude is your best adviser. He gives you time ; he wishes you to prove yourself : so do I."

"But proof is no proof. I don't understand myself," exclaimed Helen. "Aunt Fanny,"—she looked at her aunt simply and trustfully,— "I do love Claude. Yes, I think I do. I could not have promised him what I did if I had not cared for him ; for I meant to be quite sincere ; and very often—no, sometimes—I feel quite as I know I ought ; and I think him better and wiser than any one else in the world ; and it makes me miserable when I give him pain ; and yet I can't prevent myself from doing it. Is it because I am so to every one ?"

"He jars upon you, perhaps," said Mrs. Graham.

"He makes me feel perverse," replied Helen. "But a great many people do that when they try to rule me. Aunt Fanny, why do you look so grave ?"

"Because you vex me, Helen. You are throwing away happiness."

"I need not. I will not, if you tell me it is right to let every thing go on."

"God forbid !" Mrs. Graham began eagerly, then checked herself. "Helen, my child, no human being could take such a responsibility."

"Then you tell me it is not right. Oh ! Aunt Fanny, have pity upon me ! I can never, never decide."

"Answer me one question, Helen. Would the feeling which you entertain for Claude satisfy you, if it were offered to yourself ?"

"I.—Aunt Fanny, he is a man, and I am a woman."

"Yet you are both human beings. But I will give you another test,—action ; which is the proof of all love, earthly or heavenly. Is it pleasure or pain to do what Claude wishes ?"

"Pleasure to please him ; not to obey him."

Mrs. Graham was silent, and very thoughtful.

"Is it the proof ?" continued Helen, in an altered tone. "I can never like to obey any one."

"I would rather not answer the question, my child."

"Aunt Fanny, you must—you shall, answer it ! If pleasure in obedience be a test of love, I have no love in my nature."

"You don't know yourself, Helen."

"But I have always felt the same," replied Helen. "My life has been one continual storm ; hidden, perhaps,—but it has gone on when no one suspected it. I can do what I am told, outwardly,—all people can do that ;—but like it ! submit in my heart !—you may as well ask me to chain the wind as control my own free will."

"You can never do it for yourself, Helen. Yet it must be done if there is to be peace on earth or rest in heaven."

Helen was struck by her aunt's tone. Her own manner became more composed as she said, thoughtfully, "God formed us as we are."

"Yes ; with an independent will, which must become one with His before we can find either goodness or happiness ; and which never will be one until we love Him with a perfect love. And there is no irreverence, Helen, in tracing out the analogy between this love and the deepest human affection, because it is done for us in the Bible. When we love truly, our will becomes one with that of the individual whom we love, and obedience ceases to be obedience."

"I should do every thing Claude wished if I were married," said Helen ; "it would be my duty."

"If love cannot make you do so before you are married, dearest, you may believe, from my experience, that duty will not enable you to do it afterwards. The obedience which a man requires from his wife is that of the heart."

Helen rested her forehead upon her hands, and a bitter sigh escaped her.

Presently she looked up ; her face expressed intense suffering. She pressed her aunt's hand, and said, "No one will ever love me as well."

"And no one will ever so well deserve your love in return," said Mrs. Graham.

"And I have done him grievous wrong," said Helen ; "he will hate me."

"He will honour you for your truth : but, Helen, you have a duty owing to him,—not to be hasty. He gives you time for consideration, and you must use it."

"I have considered," replied Helen ; "and you have given me tests."

"Yet you may be mistaken. Claude's letter has drawn you closer to each other than you were before."

Helen started, clasped her hands tightly together, and hiding her face on her aunt's shoulder, whispered, "I am so unworthy of him."

"He will never reject you from his heart for that acknowledgment, my darling. But try yourself. A week hence there will be less of this painful excitement; you will be able, during his absence, to understand your own mind; you will see what your thoughts turn to; whether the knowledge of what he is and what he feels for you, which, I am sure, you understand now better than you have ever done, can make the prospect of your future life with him easy and happy. There will be many little ways of judging of the state of your own heart; and you are too sincere, Helen, to deceive him when he has once brought the question so plainly before you. All I would urge upon you is, not to allow any fear of giving pain to prevent you from being honest with him."

"And you will not help me?" said Helen, reproachfully.

"Yes, help you to the very utmost, but not decide for you. If I were to do so, the responsibility would not be the less yours in accepting my decision."

Helen sat deep in thought; then she said, "I shall make him very miserable."

"Shall you make yourself miserable?" said Mrs. Graham

"I don't know; I had rather not think about myself."

"But you must, dearest. It is one of those cases in which, if we sacrifice ourselves, we must sacrifice others."

"I am so confused, I don't know what I feel," said Helen.

"Then try to act;—put before you all he wishes you to do or to be; endeavour to please him, now that he is absent, as you would if he were present: and remember that you are still free, in one sense of the word,—free to draw back, by his own consent."

"Free!" Helen said the word again to herself, and there was a tone of mournfulness in the intonation of her voice.

"If you can strive to please him, heartily, without a feeling of constraint," said Mrs. Graham, "that will be your truest test."

"And mamma will say, what?" murmured Helen.

"It is not a case either for parent or friend," said Mrs. Graham. "God will be your Judge, and He also will be your Guide."

Helen trembled. "Aunt Fanny, it is very awful, and I am so wicked!"

‘Helen, dearest, you have one virtue, which is the root of all,—truth.’

“Oh, Aunt Fanny! no, you don’t know me; Claude does not either; I could love him better if he did.” And Helen gazed sorrowfully at her aunt, and added, “Truth, if one has it, only helps to make one feel that one is untrue.”

“God bless and help you, my darling,” were Mrs. Graham’s parting words. And Helen laid her head on her pillow, comforted by the feeling of having obtained sympathy, though still weary and heart-sick with indecision.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE carriage came for Helen the next day, and she went home: no one pressed her to stay, and neither Isabella nor Anna expressed regret at her departure. She had been too much absorbed in her own thoughts to make herself agreeable. Yet a feeling of exceeding loneliness came over her, as she looked back and saw her aunt’s sweet, kind face at the door, and felt that she must now return to the uncongeniality of her own little world, and bear the burden of her doubtful heart without human sympathy.

Mrs. Graham’s last injunction had been,—“Put aside your feelings, my child, and try yourself by action;” and Helen, in accordance with the suggestion, spent the short time of her drive in thinking over what Claude would most wish her to do. He had talked to her about the employment of her time, urged regularity, suggested visits to the poor; and if he had been there to help her, she might now, perhaps, have entered into his plans. But all seemed vapid when she was to set to work by herself. She thought that her aunt expected too much of her; and, unused to mental exertion, soon sank back into the wearying reveries upon feeling, against which she had been warned.

Lady Louisa Stuart and Miss Manners were looking out for her, expecting to hear amusing stories of the aborigines. Lady Louisa had prepared some more tiresome jokes about Petruchio, and Miss Manners was ready with condolences for his absence; but Helen avoided them both, hurried up stairs to her own room, and was soon followed thither by Lady Augusta.

“You have had such a disappointment, my love; I can’t say how vexed I have been, more almost for Claude than for yourself; he is terribly cut up about it, as he says in his note.”

"May I see the note, mamma?"

Lady Augusta hesitated. "I don't know that I have it with me." She took out a number of notes from a pocket-book. "This,—no, this is not from Claude,—it is Mrs. Hopeton's apology for not coming to-morrow night; and there has been a request from Sir John Hume that he may bring a niece; and Lord Steyne talks of a friend who wishes to come: we shall have quite a crowd."

"That is Claude's note," said Helen, pointing to one folded in a peculiar way, and written on rather blue note-paper.

"How quick you are in discovering, my dear!" but Lady Augusta appeared unwilling to produce the note, till Helen put out her hand for it.

"It is a short note—condensed; all his are; but his few words express more than volumes from other people."

Helen read the note.

"My dear Lady Augusta, — A telegraphic message has just summoned me to London, and I have not a minute to spare. It is most unfortunate, as I shall not be able to be at Mrs. Graham's to-night, to exhibit the magic lanthorn; and I am, of course, particularly vexed in thinking of Helen. I enclose a note for Sir Henry about some political matters, which I wished to have talked over with him. I don't know when I shall be down again; but you may be sure it will be the very first day possible. You will, I trust, have a successful evening; I wish, indeed, I could be with you; but I have foreseen from the beginning how it might be, and must resign myself as best I may, though I do not yet give up all hope.

"Very faithfully yours,

"CLAUDE EGERTON.

"I have written to Helen, and made arrangements for some one to exhibit the magic lanthorn for me."

"He takes the world philosophically," said Helen, in a bitter tone, as she laid Claude's note upon the table.

"His mind is so admirably well disciplined," replied Lady Augusta. "He never allows himself to be disturbed, or at least to show it."

"Some people like the principle of faith in affection," said Helen, sarcastically.

"My love, you are severe. What lessons have you been learn-

ing at Wingfield? But I ought not to find fault: I should remember that young people can never be satisfied with **any** expression of affection."

"I am infinitely obliged to Claude for taking thought for me and the magic lanthorn together," said Helen, again taking up the note.

"You are laughing, my dear; you don't really mean to be so unjust."

"I read the words as they are written," said Helen.

"And put a wrong interpretation upon them."

"And take them for what they mean, rather."

"Why should much be said to me?" continued Lady Augusta: "you have his own words to yourself to satisfy you."

Helen was silent.

And silent she continued, then and afterwards, during the day; brooding over her own distracting thoughts, blaming Claude, condemning herself, yielding, as she ever yielded, to impulses from within, and influences from without; jarred upon by Lady Louisa's tiresome jokes; fretted to irritation by Miss Manners' stately condolences on Claude's absence; alarmed by Lady Augusta's keen looks of surprise; and startled by her father's quick, though good-tempered reproofs of her dulness.

Could it be a matter of astonishment if the great question, which was to decide her fate, became more and more bewildering, and was thought over, settled, unsettled, settled again, and in reality left to be determined—Helen knew not how, and dreaded to think?

Such was the state of things on the day of the ball. The routine of Ivors was disturbed then, as had been the case at Wingfield, a few days before; but the disturbance was of a very different character, being managed by the servants, who were bound to take care that no one should be "put out" more than was absolutely necessary, and therefore kept all arrangements to the utmost in the background. Lady Augusta, indeed, superintended herself, but that was her habit; she superintended every thing, and never believed that the world could go on without her; but Helen was not consulted, except about the music, and had a long, dull, dreary day with Lady Louisa and Miss Manners, feeling that she had no excuse for leaving them, and yet longing more and more every minute to go to her own room, and indulge in some of those "few more" thoughts which, although they prevented her from arriving at any definite conclusion, were becoming a necessary of life.

"It is a comfort that balls are not given every day," said Miss Manners.

The observation broke a long silence in the library, though not in the house, for the sound of hammering was heard unceasingly.

"I don't think they interfere much with us," said Helen, quickly; fearing a quotation from Shakspeare.

Lady Louisa looked up from a novel, and owned that she had been nearly asleep, and asked what they were talking about.

"Balls," replied Miss Manners. "Helen likes them."

"I beg your pardon, but I am not aware that I said so," replied Helen, shortly.

"But you implied it, my love, and it is natural, I imagine, at your age, when the fresh spring of youth and enthusiasm makes movement delightful. For myself, I confess, my tastes lay always in a different direction; a search into the wonders of creation, which afforded food for reflecting hours, was from infancy my craving."

"A geological baby," said Lady Louisa; "I wish I had seen you."

Helen laughed faintly, and observed that she certainly could not imagine Miss Manners dancing.

"Not a minuet?" asked Lady Louisa.

And Miss Manners answered sharply for herself, that minuets had ceased to be in fashion, long before she was old enough to dance.

"I was thinking whether a minuet would suit Petruchio," said Lady Louisa. "If I remember rightly, he does not take kindly to the polka."

"Neither for himself nor for any one else, does he?" inquired Miss Manners. "I thought I understood as much from some remark of Lady Augusta's the other day."

Helen shrank from the subject with irritation and annoyance.

Lady Louisa observed it, and, as usual, had not sufficient tact or kindness to overlook it.

"He does not interfere with you, Helen, I hope. I really shall be quite out of patience with him in that case."

Helen appeared not to hear, and Lady Louisa fancied she looked vexed.

"Too bad!" she continued: "a real Petruchio!"

'Better 'twere that both of us did fast,'

and then he goes away and leaves you to fast alone. I would be revenged upon him."

Helen's pride could not brook this; she remarked, coldly,

"That Mr. Egerton and she quite understood each other," and walked out of the room, followed by the sharp tone of Lady Louisa's laugh.

In the hall she encountered her father, and was turning from him, so as not to speak, when he stopped her. "What! running away from me, my child? I have scarcely seen you this morning. A dull day, I am afraid," and he kissed her, — "but we must try to be merry for the sake of others."

"We shall do very well, I dare say," replied Helen, in a light tone, which effectually repelled sympathy.

"It was too bad of Claude," continued Sir Henry; "or, I suppose, one must say of his lawyer. I don't believe, myself, that there was any necessity for his going. I know the business they make such a fuss about. It was one of Claude's crotchets, to meet that particular individual on that particular day; but I am certain it might all have been done as well by writing. You mustn't let him be crotchety, Helen. He is too young to begin in that line." Sir Henry patted his daughter on both cheeks, and went to his own room.

Helen went to hers. For the next half hour she might have been heard walking up and down, with somewhat of a man's restlessness; then she took up a pen and wrote,—

"I cannot give you the answer you require, my mind is full of perplexity; but I am sure of one thing, that I shall never make you happy, and therefore it is better we should part." The pen was thrown down, when Helen had gone so far, whilst pressing her forehead tightly, as though to still the working of her brain, her eye retraced the words; then opening a private drawer in her desk, she took Claude's letter from it, and laid it beside her.

"My lady wishes you to come down into the hall, if you please, Mademoiselle;" said Annette's voice at the door.

It was immediately followed by Lady Augusta's. "Helen, my love, may I say one word to you? Are you busy?"

Helen unfastened the door.

"I am sorry to interrupt you, my dear, but I wanted to ask your opinion — but you are writing for the post." Lady Augusta's eyes fell with a scrutinising glance upon the table.

"It is nothing, it need not go to-day," said Helen, impatiently.

"But you are desirous it should, I see. I had no idea you were so engaged, but Claude will be anxious to hear from you."

Helen longed to be able to say that she was not writing to him.

"I will keep my business till presently," continued Lady Augusta; though one thing I may as well say now: I am anxious to

know how matters stand with you about the ball. Does Claude still think of keeping you under his loving restraint?"

Helen broke in upon the sentence: "Mamma, Claude will never keep me under restraint any more; we are parted,"—she leaned her head upon the table, and burst into tears.

"Parted! Helen! can you dare?"—Lady Augusta's eyes sparkled,—but with one moment of self-recollection her manner changed. She took Helen's hand in hers. "There is some misunderstanding in this, my love."

"There has been a misunderstanding from the beginning," said Helen, recovering herself, and speaking with dignity; "we were never intended for each other."

"Nonsense! my dear; begging your pardon, simple nonsense! What is it all? Let me hear whose fault it is." Lady Augusta sat down, tapping the table with a paper knife, as though she would fain have beaten the words out of Helen's mouth.

"It is no fault;—yet, I suppose it is mine,—it will be called mine," said Helen, proudly.

"Because you have provoked him, silly, infatuated child! You have treated him as you have done every one from childhood. I saw how it would be. I felt you were casting away all the advantages for which I had laboured."

The conversation heard on the evening of Mrs. Graham's party, flashed upon Helen's recollection. In an instant it came to her with its full meaning. She started from her seat, and exclaimed: "Then you have laboured, mamma! The world is right, and Claude has been entrapped."

There was one moment's pause. Lady Augusta's reply came forth, slow, measured, soft, and mournful:—"Yes, entrapped, if you so please to call it; brought by the ordering of Providential circumstances into close intercourse with one as fair as she is false and weak; made to rest his happiness upon her, and then deceived. Helen, you have cruelly disappointed me."

"Not as I have disappointed myself," replied Helen, "nor,"—her voice shook,— "as I have disappointed Claude."

"Does he say so?" asked Lady Augusta, sarcastically, her eye turning to the letter in Claude's handwriting, which was by Helen's side.

Helen would not see the unspoken request, that it might be read; she only replied: "He requires of me more than I can give, and therefore it is better we should part."

"Helen, you are too idiotic!" exclaimed Lady Augusta. "How many wives do you think give their husbands what you would call their full affections before they are married?"

"Aunt Fanny thinks that I am right," said Helen.

Lady Augusta did not instantly trust herself with a reply ; when she did, she drew near Helen, laid her hand upon her arm, with a firm, painful pressure, and said, speaking between her half-closed lips : " This is the first and last time, Helen, that Mrs. Graham comes between you and me."

" She is my aunt," said Helen.

" And I am your mother. In the eyes of the world I hold your mother's place."

Helen's fingers were tightly clenched together, as she replied, " My father shall be my judge."

" Let him be. He will bear none of this folly."

" He will let me be free," said Helen ; and she added sarcastically : " he at least has not laboured for my advantage, and so will have nothing to regret."

" I bear with your taunt, Helen. I might have expected no less. Gratitude has always been a stranger to your heart."

" No, mamma ; never. I have been grateful to you ; I am grateful ; for your care, and your kindness and instruction ; for things which I never could have had without you ; but I am not grateful for having been made a plaything, a tool—having the eyes of the neighbourhood turned upon me in derision. Mamma, if you will not be proud for me, I will be proud for myself. By your own acknowledgment Claude has not been free in this matter. It is my will that he should be ; and from this moment I restore him his liberty."

She took up her pen, and wrote again. Lady Augusta stood by with folded hands, watching, as sentence after sentence followed rapidly. When, at length, Helen's name was signed, Lady Augusta laid her hand upon the paper, and said : " It is for your father's perusal."

She expected a burst of passion, but Helen's answer was calm : " It is intended for him to-morrow."

And Lady Augusta, leaving the letter in Helen's possession, departed without another word.

CHAPTER XLIV.

BRILLIANTLY gay was Ivers on the evening of the long expected ball. London workmen had fitted up the hall for dancing ; artistic taste had hung the walls with rich drapery, and decorated

them with evergreens and flowers, and brightened the long rooms by silver sconces, and gorgeous chandeliers. It was a scene of fairy land, magical in its beauty; room opening into room; mirror reflecting mirror; a maze interminable of light and colour; and through these dazzling apartments wandered Lady Augusta Clare, queen-like, in a dress of rich dark velvet, and a magnificent shawl of Brussels lace, fastened by a diamond brooch. Yet the cares of her domestic kingdom sat heavy upon her head. She remarked every thing, knew whether every thing was in its right place, but it was by instinct only. Even when she gave her final decisive orders, her heart was not in her words. There was a marked nervousness in her manner, as though she dreaded some startling news, or some painful interview.

"Is Sir Henry in his study, Marks?" was her question at last to the servant who had been following her footsteps, and executing her commands.

"Sir Henry went to his room about half an hour ago, my lady. I don't know whether he has come down again."

"Go and see;" and Lady Augusta sat down wearily in an arm-chair by the fireside, and in her splendid drawing-room, sighed a real, hearty sigh, in which there was no striving for effect.

Marks was gone a long time, but Lady Augusta was patient; except that every now and then she raised her head quickly, as a figure passed the open door at the further end of the room.

Presently there came one which did not pass, but paused, looked into the apartment, evidently not seeing that it was occupied, entered, and stood for a few seconds under the glass chandelier.

A very lovely face and form it was,—perfect in grace, attractively sweet, though with somewhat of proud sadness in its expression; but when Lady Augusta said "Helen!" there was a sudden start,—the whole countenance changed; a fierce, fiery glance flashed like lightning over it, and Helen turned away, and walked slowly out of the apartment.

Two hours afterwards the rooms were crowded; dancing had begun; laughter, and conversation, and music mingled their joyous and inspiring tones; and Lady Augusta Clare, as she sailed from room to room, speaking kindly words, and distributing gracious smiles, was looked upon with admiration, envy, and respect. Externally, indeed, there was every thing to exhilarate her. Heterogeneous as the ingredients of her party were, she yet contrived to assimilate them, by her own judicious tact. On this one evening she seemed to have forgotten exclusiveness, and the dread of contamination, and to be able to throw herself into the minds

and sympathies of persons, with whom in general she would have professed to have no one idea in common.

For every thing that Lady Augusta Clare thought it wise to do, she considered it also wise to do well; every thing except —; but why find fault with her for an exception, common more or less to all? why complain of her principle, when in fact she was perfectly consistent? Lady Augusta did not really think it worth while to labour for Heaven as she did for earth; and therefore she was but carrying out her motives into action, when she left the work of Heaven to circumstances.

"Sitting still, dear Susan? how does that happen?" Lady Augusta placed her hand on Susan Graham's shoulder with a gentle tenderness, which was quite maternal.

"I have been dancing a good deal, and I am tired," was Susan's reply; "and besides, I think, — are n't they going to try the polka?"

"Oh, yes, I see! and your dear mother, I know, is particular. But young people are not all as well disciplined as yourselves, and are apt to be rebellious in these matters. Have you seen Helen lately?"

Lady Augusta looked at the circle forming for the dance with an anxious eye.

"Helen was talking to Captain Mordaunt just now," said Susan; "she was near the conservatory."

"Are you inquiring for Helen?" asked Miss Aubrey, who, with Mr. Frank Hume, was standing quite close to Susan, waiting for the polka to begin. "She has been undergoing an ordeal of bantering from her brother and Lady Louisa. It really is too bad of them to tease her as they do, only that she is quite a match for them. She is in a most strange mood to-night."

"Maurice is very provoking," exclaimed Lady Augusta; "I must go and stop him." She moved away with a more hasty step than usual.

Miss Aubrey laughed. "Lady Augusta will have a difficult task if she means to protect Helen from observation. Every one is wondering at this new fancy of hers."

"Oh, about dancing!" and Susan opened her eyes with a look of sudden and astounded perception, which seemed to increase Miss Aubrey's amusement, as she turned away, and whispered to her partner, "Saintly individuals who live in the clouds ought not to venture into a ball-room."

Susan was unconscious of giving rise to satire: she was thinking of Helen; feeling for her annoyance; wondering whether Claude Egerton was quite right; wondering still more that Helen

should not have had sufficient tact to keep her own secret. She fell into a reverie, undisturbed; for the fireplace was on one side of her, and Isabella on the other, very much amused in watching the dancing, and not troubling herself to interrupt her.

A sharp voice broke in upon her meditations: "Miss Graham, you are quite in the fashion in sitting down." Lady Louisa Stuart had seated herself by Susan's side.

"Rather the contrary, to judge by appearances," replied Susan. "It is very amusing to look on."

"It must give you a pleasant feeling of superiority; yet I wonder you don't retire with Helen. I have been trying to persuade her that we are, none of us, good enough for her."

"And she is not inclined to take your advice, I suppose," said Susan, in a tone of indifference.

"She likes to be peculiar, as she always does. I have been taxing her with the cause, but she won't acknowledge it." Lady Louisa looked scrutinisingly at Susan; but the glance which met hers gave no reply to the question implied.

"I should have thought," continued Lady Louisa, "that there was some hidden influence at work, but that

'Love's feeling is more soft and sensible
Than are the tender horns of cockled snails;'

and there is neither softness nor feeling in making the poor child a mark for general observation in this way."

"Perhaps Mr. Egerton trusted too much to the world's kindness," said Susan, quickly.

"Oh, then he is at the bottom of it! I thought so;" and Lady Louisa's countenance lighted up with amusement: "I was sure you would be able to tell me all about it."

Susan felt so vexed with herself that she could almost have cried; yet she showed very little annoyance, and answered coolly, "Whatever you may wish to know, Lady Louisa, I must refer you to Helen herself."

"Thank you, no occasion for that; between ourselves,—I would not have Helen told of it,—Miss Manners and I have a little bet depending upon the matter. We were sure Petruchio had been at work." Lady Louisa, in her youthful lace dress, swept across to the opposite side of the apartment, where Miss Manners and Sir John Hume were discussing some geological curiosities lately found in the neighbourhood.

Susan watched her,—saw the smile of understanding—the *satirical* glance,—and then observed Lady Louisa pass on, *whi-*

pering her observations to one and the other, whilst curious eyes were directed to the doorway, near which Helen still stood with her brother and Captain Mordaunt. Mrs. Graham's eyes, also, were bent in the same direction; and after a few seconds she followed Lady Louisa, and went up to the spot where Helen was standing, like a chafed lioness, proudly warding off the darts aimed at her, yet stung by them to the quick.

"My love, you must be tired of standing; there is a seat by Susan; won't you come?"

A moment before, Helen's look and tone had been satirical and contemptuous; it changed in an instant, when Mrs. Graham spoke; but she said, carelessly, "Thank you, no; I do very well here."

"And Miss Clare is going to be my partner," said Captain Mordaunt.

"I don't know; I may not dance at all. Aunt Fanny, I think I will come with you;" but, instead of joining Susan, Helen turned suddenly away, and crossed the ante-room to the conservatory. Mrs. Graham followed.

The conservatory was empty. Helen sat down at the farthest extremity. "That music! oh, to be out of its reach!" She put her hand to her ear.

"You are nearly so now, and you may stay," replied Mrs. Graham.

"And it is better for me that I should. Yet I can't; I must go back again;" and Helen half rose.

Mrs. Graham stopped her. "What does all this mean, Helen?"

"I am noticed; I have made myself remarkable; he made me do it."

"He trusted to your own tact and discretion," replied Mrs. Graham, reproachfully.

"It is cruel: he ought to have known what it would be. And that woman, Lady Louisa!"

"You will not place yourself at her mercy, Helen?"

"I am at no one's mercy," exclaimed Helen, hastily. "Aunt Fanny," and her voice sank, "I have resolved to be free."

There was no immediate reply. Helen repeated the words, looking at her aunt steadily; and then Mrs. Graham said, sorrowfully, "I feared it might be so."

Helen went on with rapidity: "I could not do as you told me, — I could do nothing. I don't know why I have decided, but I have. He has no right to control me: I could tell Lady Louisa so, if — but, Aunt Fanny, I can't."

"Of course you can't. Explanations with her would be quite out of place."

"She finds out every thing. She has been guessing and teasing, and she has set Maurice to tease; and I have laughed with them, as if I did not care; but I can't help caring. There would be one easy way of silencing them all."

"By doing what they wish, you mean," said Mrs. Graham.

"Yes, showing them that it is all nothing; and that I am not bound now, although they think I am."

"Pardon me, Helen, I should say you are bound." Mrs. Graham's face showed surprise and displeasure.

"What! when I have made up my mind that it shall all be at an end?"

"What you have made up your mind to do is not the question. Is it done? Have you had an explanation with Mr. Egerton?"

Helen twisted the rings of her gold chain with the petulance of a petted child.

"Till you have," continued Mrs. Graham, "you can't possibly consider yourself free. And, Helen, I can scarcely believe that you wish it."

Helen's face changed: pride and temper contended with an expression of inward suffering. She evaded a direct reply, and exclaimed: "He wrote to mamma; there was no feeling for me in what he said. It is his own wish, Aunt Fanny:" as the words were uttered, Helen's conscience reproached her for untruth, and she added: "At least, you would think so, if you were to read his words."

"I don't wish to judge. It is quite impossible indeed, my dear child, that I should. All I entreat of you is to command yourself. A very little self-respect will conquer sarcasm."

Helen's pride was wounded. She said bitterly, "It may seem a small trial, but an insect's sting may cause as much irritation as a serpent's: Lady Louisa is unbearable."

"Dearest Helen, think only of what is your plain duty."

"Claude should not have exposed me to observation," replied Helen, sharply.

It was Mrs. Graham's turn then to be vexed. She rose and walked towards the door of the conservatory.

"Aunt Fanny!" Helen's tone was softened, as she followed and tried to detain her aunt. "You are ashamed of me."

"Grieved for you rather, Helen. You have noble and generous feelings, but you are too weak to act upon them."

"Weak! yes, I am weak," exclaimed Helen, passionately:

"weak in having ever consented to place myself in a position in which any man could dictate to me."

Mrs. Graham turned and kissed her sorrowfully, but she said no more.

Helen lingered in the conservatory but a few moments longer ; and when Mrs. Graham saw her again, a quadrille had been just formed, and she was standing with Captain Mordaunt prepared to take part in it.

It was nearly supper-time. Lady Augusta came up to Mrs. Graham, with symptoms of a tempestuous current underneath her bland exterior: "You have great influence with Helen; do you think you can prevail upon her to do what her father wishes? I say nothing of myself." The tone was painfully bitter.

"I don't understand——" began Mrs. Graham.

"I have no time for explanations, but perhaps, as she confides entirely in you, you would have the goodness to urge upon her attention to her father's guests."

Lady Augusta walked away: Mrs. Graham said quietly to Isabella, who had just sat down by her, "Lady Augusta is annoyed; where is Helen?"

"There, opposite," said Isabella. "You see the circle,—Lord Steyne, and Miss Aubrey, and Lady Louisa, and the Humes. I heard Lady Augusta say just now to Helen that people were becoming dull, and that she ought to exert herself. But, mamma, Helen will go her own way to-night, as she does always. How Lady Louisa is laughing. And Lady Augusta looks so angry, standing in the distance."

There was a discussion going on about a *valse à deux temps* which was to be tried, and in the meantime the music had ceased.

Lady Augusta joined the group, and spoke in rather a low voice: "This really won't do, you must mix yourselves more."

Captain Mordaunt put up his eye-glass, and surveyed the room. "Your ladyship need not be uneasy. We are affording quite sufficient entertainment for the aborigines."

"I had forgotten them," said Helen, carelessly.

"You have done nothing to-night to make yourself agreeable, Helen," observed Lady Augusta, "and your father is vexed with you."

Helen's face flushed at the reproof.

"I see what people think," continued Lady Augusta. "It was all very well at first; but they are herding together now in sets. This kind of thing can't be allowed."

"I can do nothing to prevent it," said Helen.

"You must, my love. If you don't choose to dance with the people, you must talk to them. Maurice, I thought you were going to ask that Miss Dawson to dance."

"Was I? I had forgotten; but it can't be now; we must have the valse first, it has been ordered."

And Maurice languidly turned away, as though he had settled the matter by a conclusive argument, and added: "Now, Helen, say you will stand up."

"It is not the polka," said Lady Louisa, "so there is no broken vow."

Helen changed colour; but Lady Augusta spoke before she could answer. "I can have no nonsense of this kind; a country dance will put every thing right, and then we will have supper."

Maurice held up his hands in despair. "Down the middle and up again! one should faint before one had reached the end. Come, Helen, set the fashion of the valse and every one will follow it."

"And we will not tell upon you," said Lady Louisa. "Sir John, Lord Steyne, Jane, my dear, we can all vow it was not the polka."

"Maurice, order supper immediately," exclaimed Lady Augusta. "Louisa, this is absurd. Helen, I wonder you allow it."

"Nay," replied Lady Louisa, "why not?"

"He does it under name of perfect love."

"Whatever the name may be," said Lady Augusta, haughtily, "Helen understands the feeling, and values it. Lord Steyne, may I ask you to take Lady Louisa into the supper-room?"

Lady Louisa was silent, but a contemptuous smile curled her lip.

Lord Steyne offered her his arm. Miss Aubrey and Sir John Hume followed the move, and in a few seconds there was a general rush to the supper-room.

Helen seized Lady Augusta's hand, and spoke in a low tone: "I am going to bed; I can't bear this."

"Out of the question, my love. You have scarcely taken notice of any one, and it will be so remarkable."

"I am remarked already. Mamma, when next you speak of me, I must beg that you will not answer for my feelings." Without giving Lady Augusta time to reply, she moved away.

The crowd stopped the doorway, and she could not escape. Captain Mordaunt came up, and asked if he might take her into supper, and she mechanically acquiesced.

They moved on slowly, and after going a few paces, Helen sat

down upon a bench to wait. There was a hubbub of voices, and the band was still playing in the hall, where Maurice had remained, bent upon trying the *valse à deux temps*.

"Carriage wheels!" said Captain Mordaunt. "People are going early."

Helen listened, but heard nothing, except the Babel of sound immediately around her.

Some one near mentioned Mr. Egerton's name. Captain Mordaunt asked when he was expected.

Helen did not know; he might come any day. Her manner was short and ungracious.

Just then Maurice appeared from the hall. As soon as he caught sight of them, he came up. "What! Not gone into supper yet? that's capital. I must have you back again. There are just a few of our own set left."

"Hopeless, I am afraid," said Captain Mordaunt, glancing at Helen. She scarcely heard him; her ear had again caught the sound of Claude's name.

Several servants entered the passage, and there were inquiries for Lady Augusta. She issued from the supper-room radiant in smiles. Her eye fell upon Helen, and she came up to her. "So delightful, my love! He is just come; unexpectedly, indeed. Poor fellow! what an effort he must have made."

Helen's face became pale as death. Lady Louisa Stuart followed close behind Lady Augusta. She stood by Helen unperceived, and murmured,

"'An awful rule and right supremacy.'

Petruchio comes to enjoy his triumph."

Lady Augusta turned upon her sternly. "Louisa, you forget yourself. Helen, my love, you will have your full reward now."

A contemptuous flash shot from Helen's eyes. She put her arm within her brother's, and said, "Maurice, we will try the valse;" and when the music again commenced, Helen was to be seen whirling in the dance with Captain Mordaunt. On and on, faster and faster, flushed and eager in her proud wilfulness, Helen moved; conscious only of one feeling, that she had asserted her own free will, and had shown herself, as she imagined, independent of Lady Augusta, of Claude, of Lady Louisa Stuart, of the mocking world. Numbers flocked in from the supper-room, and joined the dance. Even in the whirl of her excitement, Helen was aware of a painful, suffocating dread. Even when all swam before her eyes, she sought the forms of the bystanders, and in the bewilder-

ment of rapid motion, strove to distinguish them one from the other, and then, rushing past, forgot or tried to forget, and looked again, and thought she saw,—and hurried on wildly, breathlessly.

“Helen, this is too much; you will be ill.” The calm, sad, reproachful tone of Mrs. Graham’s voice came to Helen’s ear clear as a knell, in the midst of the joyous music. She sank upon the nearest seat, and her dizzy head was buried in her hands. A dark figure stood opposite; a keen, penetrating gaze was fixed upon her. Helen raised her head; her eye met Claude’s, and almost staggering, as she seized her aunt’s arm for support, she rushed from the hall, and hurried to her own room.

It haunted her, that gaze; it looked upon her from the darkened walls; it came before her, when she knelt, from habit, to repeat her evening prayer; it dwelt with her when she closed her eyes. And what a tale of anguish and disappointment it told!

Helen tore in pieces the letter in which she had explained her feelings, and before Claude retired to rest, he received a few hasty lines.

“I am unworthy of you, and you acknowledge it. We are parted for ever.

—H. C.”

A feverish night succeeded; broken sleep and distracted dreams. When the light of morning broke upon the horizon, Helen, awakened by a rumbling sound beneath her window, was gazing from it at a fly, which stood at the hall door. A man-servant brought out a portmanteau and carpet-bag, and the driver inquired if there was more luggage, and said that the gentleman must be quick, or he would be late for the train.

A cold tremor stole over Helen, and she sat down. A quick step was heard along the passage; it paused before her door. A note or a message it might be; but it passed on, and then there were distant sounds very indistinct. The hall door opened, and Claude came out; the driver let down the carriage steps, and he jumped in. Helen saw his face as he looked out. His eye was seeking her window; it rested there. The carriage drove off, and still, still, the lingering, hopeless, heart-sickening gaze was directed towards her room. But the wheels rapidly turned into the avenue; he was out of sight; and Helen, unable to find relief in tears, sat, cold and deathlike, gazing into vacancy, and realising, for the first time, that in her madness and folly she had cast away a love which it was in her power to return.

CHAPTER XLV.

THERE was a large, convenient, but old-fashioned house in Cavendish Square. It had more intricacies, and therefore more romance, than the generality of London houses: odd little rooms at the back, and curious dark passages in the underground regions. The situation was not a very exciting one; the few laurels, and evergreens, and stunted trees, and the blackened turf of a London square are seldom exhilarating to the spirits, except in the first freshness of spring, when they seem to be the harbingers and earnest of real country; and the negro-hued statue, the presiding genius of the vicinity, standing in the centre of his domains, suggests few historical ideas, except those connected with the inquiry, how long it has taken to cover his naturally pale face with such a sepulchral stain.

But Admiral Clare was very well satisfied with his mansion. It was in the neighbourhood of a good deal that was interesting, and comfortably distant from Belgravia, which, to use his own expression, was his abomination. Moreover,—and it was a most essential point,—it was within easy reach of his physician; and the Admiral, having been persuaded to undertake a journey to London, for the benefit of medical advice, was resolved in this case, as in all others through life, to do what he had to do thoroughly, and since he was to study his health, to make it his first object. Perhaps, he might not have been altogether so satisfied in his new, though temporary home, but that he had brought with him some most important ingredients, as regarded his happiness, in the shape of Mrs. Graham and her three girls, who had now no necessity for remaining at Wingfield, as Charlie was gone to a public school. Without them, it might have been a very difficult task to persuade the Admiral to move, but the idea of giving Susan the opportunity of visiting exhibitions, and Isabella the advantage of music lessons, and brightening Anna's quick intellect by lectures and sight-seeing, was a temptation not to be resisted; and, infirm though he was, and with a constitution evidently breaking, the old Admiral's energy shot up like the gleam of a dying lamp, as he made his arrangements for a spring in London.

Nearly two years had gone by since the Christmas which immediately succeeded Claude Egerton's election. Two dull and stagnant years externally; but they had left their trace upon the

Admiral's wrinkled brow. The working of the inward mind will do that as well as the pressure of outward trials; and Admiral Clare was always hoping, always restless, even when he thought and called himself quite put aside from the world, a confirmed invalid, and a martyr to the gout. His manner had lost none of its quickness, though his tone was lower, and his voice weaker. He had grown a little more deaf, and this tended to increase the irritability which was natural to him. But he strove much against it. He was always striving in some way for something in which he thought he might do better; and he showed his efforts as plainly as a child might.

"Well; and what are you after this morning?" was his half hasty, half good-humoured inquiry of Mrs. Graham, when she came into his study, as usual, about eleven o'clock, to inquire what kind of breakfast he had made. "Jennings will be here presently, and I thought you were going to stay at home and see him?"

"Half-past three is his hour, my dear sir, and there will be time enough for us to do all our shopping and have luncheon, besides, long before that."

"You women are always shopping; one would think you had the mines of Golconda at command. What is it you want?"

The question was a prelude to insisting upon paying for every thing; a fancy which Mrs. Graham was obliged continually to combat. She evaded an answer by saying that they were only trifles,—pencils, paper, and such things. Mr. Egerton had recommended them where to go.

"And he means to go with you, I suppose. What a dangler he is!"

"He has not quite time to spare for buying pencils," said Mrs. Graham. "I told him so, and he acknowledged it."

"You are always sending him to the right about, Frances. Poor young fellow! he's lonely enough; and you won't let him have the home he might have."

"He is always full of engagements," said Mrs. Graham; "and you would be the first to scold him if he did not attend to them."

"Perhaps I should. I'm given to scolding about most things. I was cross to him twice yesterday, but I mean to ask his pardon to-day."

"I don't think he is coming here to-day," observed Mrs. Graham.

"Not coming! What's that for? But never mind." And the Admiral squeezed his left hand with his right, as he often did when he felt inclined to be pettish.

"He said he should be late at the House last night, and he had to meet some one about the Education Bill this afternoon. I brought you the 'Times' with the report of his speech last night; not a very long one,—his never are,—but very much to the purpose."

The Admiral was mollified; he took the paper and wiped his spectacles. Mrs. Graham ventured another piece of information. "Dr. Jennings has sent in the 'Morning Post.' I see by it that Lady Augusta has come up rather earlier than she talked of doing. They were at a grand party last night; I forget where."

"Humph!" The Admiral did not trust himself to any more open expression of his feelings.

"And we have had an invitation to a literary soirée, given by Miss Manners," continued Mrs. Graham.

"Literary folly! That woman is enough to drive away any little sense one may chance to have. Are you going?"

"I am not sure. Miss Manners is not very much to our taste; and it is generally disappointing to see lions and lionesses when they are brought out for show. They make me think of children, of two years old, brought down stairs and told to talk and turning sulky."

"I suppose Lady Augusta's party was a dinner, not a ball," said the Admiral, sarcastically. He had evidently paid but little attention to Mrs. Graham's last remark.

"No, a dance; so the 'Morning Post' says."

"I thought she had given up the sin of dancing, and taken to eating and drinking instead," said the Admiral. "That was what people always did in my days when they professed to take a decidedly religious turn."

"Eating and drinking is the sin now," said Mrs. Graham; "and dancing is an innocent recreation."

"With prayers twice a day as an accompaniment," said the Admiral. "Ah, Frances; you and I are not good enough for this world."

"Church is a great rest; in London especially," said Mrs. Graham.

"Rest! Do you think Lady Augusta goes there for rest?" exclaimed the Admiral. "She is one of those who can't take religion without sauce; and she dresses it up now, till you don't know which is the religion and which the excitement that flavours it."

"But one must hope there is some reality in it," said Mrs. Graham.

"I was born without hope," said the Admiral.

Mrs. Graham looked grave, and answered, "It always gives me pain to talk about her."

"So it does me," replied the Admiral; "only I speak it all out, and then it's over. But I mean to be charitable; yes, I really do mean it; only, don't mention her name again." He paused for a moment, and added: "Miss Helen does n't take to church-going too, I suppose."

"Poor Helen! I wish I could tell any thing that she would take to," said Mrs. Graham.

"She has a hard life of it now, I suspect," said the Admiral, looking up keenly at Mrs. Graham.

"Lady Augusta does not easily forget," was the reply.

"Nor forgive. She has a punishment in store, you may be certain of that. Oh! Frances,"—and the Admiral raised his hand, and gave effect to his words, by striking it on the table,—
"what an escape for Claude!"

"I wish I could be quite sure of that," replied Mrs. Graham.

"What! would you have had him marry the girl after all her vagaries?"

"I would not venture to wish things altered; yet one thing is quite evident, that Claude is not happy."

"Because he does n't know how to value his own good luck. You don't mean to say that he is hankering after Helen Clare still?"

"No; if he were, he would have made some attempts at reconciliation; and he has made none: he told me that himself. The charm once broken, it was broken for ever. But he has had a great shock."

"And he deserves it. Claude Egerton is as sensible a man as you would wish to find in other matters; but when he fell in love with that giddy-pated girl, he was the greatest idiot in Christendom. A child of two years old could have taught him better."

"If it were only a shock as regarded Helen," replied Mrs. Graham, "it might be of less consequence; but it has given him an impression about all young girls."

"A true one perchance," said the Admiral; "they are a slippery race."

"Papás and mammas make them slippery, very often," replied Mrs. Graham. "If Helen had been left to her own unbiassed feelings, she would never have accepted Claude so hastily; and, therefore, never would have given him up so easily."

"She behaved very ill," said the Admiral.

"Very! I make no excuse for her, except——"

"What except? You have an exception for every one except me: you put me down as the most prejudiced old fellow alive."

"Put persons in a false position, and they must irritate each other," replied Mrs. Graham: "that was the first mistake."

"Men tumble into love, and women walk into it, I suppose," said the Admiral thoughtfully: "any how it is a happy thing for Claude, that he has tumbled out again: only you declare that he is not happy."

"I don't say that he is unhappy; he is too good and useful for that. I doubt if people are ever thoroughly unhappy when they feel that if they were taken away from the world they would be missed and wanted. But he seems to me to have lost all his light-heartedness."

"He never had very much of it."

"I think he had in a certain way. If he was not light-hearted himself, he could throw himself into the mirth of others. But that is gone now; he is a thorough man of business."

"And well for him that he is. After all, Frances, what is love worth?" and the Admiral laughed with effort.

"Heaven will tell us, I suppose," replied Mrs. Graham; "for it will live there, if it is true love." And as the Admiral seemed unwilling to speak again, she added: "Claude will be better when Helen is married."

"Then the report is true?" said the Admiral, looking up quickly.

"I don't know as to Captain Mordaunt; I suppose that is mere report; he is too silly, though he is heir to an earldom. But Lady Augusta will scarcely be contented to go through another London season without something decisive."

"I wish she would be quick about it then," said the Admiral, sharply: "it is too bad making poor Claude miserable still."

"Nay, my dear sir, it is not Lady Augusta's fault, or any person's. It is simply the result of unfortunate circumstances. All I meant was, that something of regret will often linger in a man's mind, even when real feeling is gone; and that the sight of Helen, unmarried, must tend to bring back painful recollections."

"But they have never met yet, have they? You know they went to Scotland to avoid him at first; and last year there was the sea; and when he came down to me last autumn she was away too."

"No, I don't think they have met, or Helen would have given me some idea of it. But her letters lately have been full of one topic, the wearisomeness of life."

"She'll soon get rid of that feeling in the London whirl."

"Or it will make the wearisomeness more weary," said Mrs. Graham. "I long sometimes to draw her away from the set she mixes with, and bring her amongst ourselves: but she is very fanciful; I never know what will suit her. She was very much taken, some time since, with a new acquaintance she made last year, a Madame Reinhard, a German lady; Miss Manners, I think, introduced them; and she stayed at Ivors for a fortnight. I don't know whether the fancy has lasted."

"I see, you want to put her in Claude's way again," said the Admiral, rather hastily.

"No, indeed; it would be so exceedingly awkward: though, I believe, there would be no fear for him; his idol is destroyed."

"Don't trust to it," exclaimed the Admiral; "once a fool, twice a fool! I won't have her here." He spoke with angry determination.

Mrs. Graham hastened to assure him that it was no real plan or wish of hers, merely a passing idea, to which she saw as many objections as he could himself.

"Mrs. Mordaunt, or Countess of——what is it? Change Alley! She may come then," said the Admiral, laughing.

Mrs. Graham did not laugh. She took out her watch, and said it was time to go out, if they wished to return for luncheon. But the Admiral would not give up his joke, and declared he would send congratulations to Lady Augusta, and promise to dance at the wedding.

CHAPTER XLVI.

MRS. GRAHAM was right; Claude Egerton had become completely a man of business. "A most useful fellow! capital on Committees! Always to be depended upon!" were the golden opinions which he was winning daily; and others, more valuable, were in process of formation. Claude only wanted time to give himself confidence; and then his calm-judging, deep, comprehensive mind, would be certain to make its way. He felt it; he knew that he was gaining ground in public estimation, and the knowledge, to a certain extent, pleased him. A year before, it might at once have awakened his ambition; but a change had passed over Claude: life and its interests had become vapid. He worked diligently, sometimes with apparent excitement, but it was because work was a necessity to keep him from loneliness.

He was unutterably lonely. His was the solitude of the heart's bitterness, and there is none so dreary. There were no day-dreams now to fill his imagination, no visions of home and domestic comfort to cheer him in his solitary hours. The light on the hearth was extinguished, the chambers were desolate ; and he had lost all hope, and for the time even all wish, of restoring the joys gone by. Helen had often been the cause of suffering to others by neglect and thoughtlessness in the course of her short life ; but of all injuries attributable to her, none more needed repentance than that which she had inflicted upon Claude, when she shook his trust in her truth.

It is impossible to calculate the evil we do when we destroy or even weaken faith in goodness, under any form. Claude could have borne to be rejected, he would even have thanked Helen for setting herself free, if the tie by which she was bound had been irksome ; but the manner in which they had been parted lingered by him as an incurable wound. Perhaps he had never till then realised how weak, and thoughtless, and inconsistent a woman may be. He had, indeed, been blind in his affection for Helen ; but he was justified, by observation of her character, in his belief that she was essentially true ; that her word once given, it would be kept ; that she would never act and feel towards him in his absence, as she would scorn to do in his presence. Upon this conviction he had based his love ; and by one moment of wilfulness the spell was broken ; and he saw her, not only divested of the charms which he had delusively pictured, but even of those which she really possessed. He did her injustice ; and not only so, but he was unjust also to others for her sake. He was becoming indifferent, and secretly cynical, towards women in general. He forgot that it was his own weakness which had made him imagine Helen different from what she really was. He thought she had deceived him, and he believed that others would do the same. And so his standard of a woman's excellence was insensibly lowered. The fact was shown in his every-day life. He sought the society of men, and occupied himself only with their pursuits ; and when the great need of his nature, the craving for sympathy and tenderness, made him dissatisfied with the feeling which he obtained from them, he shrank back into himself, disgusted with life even at its outset, and conscience-stricken because he could not at once find in religion and its duties a solace for the loss of earthly happiness.

This at least had been his state of mind before Mrs. Graham came to London. Since then he had found something approach-

ing to his former pleasure in women's society, though he still considered her rather an exception than a rule. She allowed him to be what he was naturally, and never forced him into exertion after happiness. If she had been absent he would have gone frequently to see the Admiral; but it would have been with a secret dread of the old man's surmises and hints, and indirect questionings as to the state of his feelings. But Mrs. Graham was his protection. He could talk to her quite freely, and her ready sympathy gave something like stimulus to the affairs which he had in hand; and she always drew the Admiral's attention away when any thing personal was said. Claude would have been a very frequent guest in Cavendish Square, if Mrs. Graham had allowed it; but she was always urging him to keep up general society, and warning him against becoming morbid; and very often an invitation was accepted, merely because she gave her opinion in its favour.

The Admiral saw this influence, and the old dormant hope revived. He flattered himself that Claude was attracted by Susan. What pleasure, as he sometimes said to himself, could a young man of eight and twenty find in the society of a woman of fifty, even though she happened to be Frances Graham, when there was a pleasant, pretty young girl close at hand, to whom he might devote himself? It was all make-believe, Claude's fancy for Mrs. Graham,—an excuse for coming to see Susan. Mrs. Graham judged more truly. In the present state of Claude Egerton's feelings, there was neither hope nor fear for any young girl, whether pretty or ugly, pleasant or the contrary. He wanted rest and sympathy. A mother, or an aunt, or any near female relative who understood him, would have given it him. And she had taken the place for the time being. Yet she kept him away as much as possible, the reason being more prudence than fear.

Claude came to Cavendish Square when Lady Augusta Clare had been in London about four days. Mrs. Graham doubted whether he was aware of the fact. Lady Augusta had decided upon coming very suddenly. At one time there was a strange report that she meant to spend the spring in the country, but Mrs. Graham never believed this. The foregoing spring, indeed, Lady Augusta had been in London very little; but that was the year after the engagement with Claude was broken off, and Helen had been ill with influenza and general weakness, and sea air had been recommended. It was not likely that the London season would again be interfered with. Whether Lady Augusta considered Helen's wishes or not, there was no doubt what her own

would be; and her name in the *Morning Post* was read by Mrs. Graham as a thing of course.

Claude came into the drawing-room, his head more full than usual of parliamentary matters. An important question was coming on, and possibly ministers would be defeated. He entered at once upon the subject, gave his own opinions, and the outlines of what he should say if he were called upon to speak; and Mrs. Graham listened, and encouraged; and for some time it might have been thought that in Claude's eyes the world only existed for the purpose of settling the disputed point.

But there came a pause — a sudden pause — not very unusual now, in the midst of Claude's most interesting conversations. He spoke abruptly to Susan. "Miss Graham, I ought to apologise to you for these politics; they can't be interesting to you."

Isabella answered for her sister. "We all like politics very much, Mr. Egerton."

"And we don't like to be supposed not to understand," added Anna.

"And we think we understand a good deal more than we do sometimes," said Mrs. Graham, laughing. "I am quite frightened at the turn Anna is taking."

"Susan, you mean, mamma; she reads all the debates."

"To the Admiral," said Susan, quickly.

"And to yourself very often," continued Anna.

"I believe it is the fashion with young ladies to take a political mania at some time or other of their lives," said Claude.

Susan looked up from her work, and asked, "Do you think it only fashion?"

"I suppose it is. I can account for it in no other way. Are you going to Miss Manners' soirée?"

Isabella was again spokeswoman: "We are not sure: are you?"

"Probably: Miss Manners bores me so," he added, addressing Mrs. Graham; "I really think I must go one evening, for the sake of ridding myself of her."

"I suppose she contrives sometimes to get interesting people together," observed Mrs. Graham.

"Yes; but she seldom produces interesting results. Tartaric acid won't effervesce without soda; people forget that."

"Perhaps Miss Manners asked us with the hope of our being the soda," said Mrs. Graham.

Claude smiled faintly, and said he was very conscious of the soda in his own composition; his only fear was that it would overpower any amount of acid which might be tried upon it.

"Miss Manners has been waiting some time, I believe, to give this party," observed Mrs. Graham. There was meaning in her tone.

Claude said quietly, "I suppose till Lady Augusta Clare arrived," and then he turned away his head, so that Mrs. Graham was unable to see his face. Still, however, he pursued the subject of the party, addressing himself to Susan. "You would meet some people, Miss Graham, whom you would like,—men who have exerted themselves for the benefit of the lower classes in London: the difficulty is to make them talk."

"Miss Manners is, I suppose, earnest," said Susan. "She takes up useful things as well as those which are only scientific."

"Yes, so far, she makes one ashamed of oneself; if one could only believe there was no show in it."

"That may be a hard thing to require," said Mrs. Graham.

"True; women so little know how to manage any thing out of the common way." And as the words were uttered, the colour rushed to Claude's cheeks, and he added hastily: "Forgive me; I really did not mean,—I only thought, that Miss Manners was a little given to show; but no doubt I am wrong: she is a very good person, I dare say."

Susan was again intent upon her work.

But Claude would not let her rest. He asked, "Do you take an interest in London charities, Miss Graham?"

He might as well have said, "Do you like balls?" there would have been just as much heart in the question. And Susan answered coldly, that she had had very few opportunities of hearing any thing about them.

Claude was not thrown back by her manner. A fit of repentance for his ungraciousness to women was upon him, and he was resolved to make amends. So he began upon the subject of ragged schools, their failures and successes; and from thence proceeded to discuss the general condition of the poor; giving anecdotes and illustrations: and at length the subject engrossed him, and he passed out of the region of cynicism, and became himself again—himself in the olden days.

Several times Mrs. Graham tried to stop him; but it is pleasant to us all to be made conscious of our own identity, by having bygone feelings revived, and Claude liked his conversation for that reason, and continued it, addressing himself now to Mrs. Graham, instead of Susan.

Yet the stern reality of the present came back at last.

Anna's punctuality reminded her that they had visits to pay,

and in a pause of the conversation, she rather awkwardly mentioned the fact. Isabella begged her not to talk about them, but Claude instantly took his hat, and apologised for having detained them. "I had forgotten the visits," said Mrs. Graham; "I don't think they can be very important; only Anna has such a memory for disagreeable duties."

"They will not be all disagreeable," replied Anna; "at least to Susan;" and then she stopped suddenly, as if remembering something that had better not be said.

Claude looked surprised; but Mrs. Graham added directly, "Susan will be very glad to see Helen; only it is doubtful if we shall find her at home."

"To-morrow will do as well," said Susan: she went on with her work, though Anna endeavoured to take it from her. Claude was most entirely absorbed in moving the position of two little china figures, which stood upon the mantelpiece. He might have been realising Hans Andersen's tales, and giving them imaginary life.

"You had better get ready at once, my dears," said Mrs. Graham; "the carriage was ordered at a quarter to four. Isabella, you are not going; it must be nearly your time for reading to the Admiral." The hint was sufficient; the three girls departed, and Mrs. Graham and Claude were left alone. Claude turned from his china figures, as soon as the door was closed. His countenance had in those few moments assumed the worn, saddened look, which was now its habitual expression. There was an evident effort, and then he said, "Thank you for mentioning her name naturally; it is what I always wish."

"I thought you did. I saw that you chose to speak of Lady Augusta."

"There is no reason why I should not speak of both," he said, with some bitterness.

"Except that it might be painful."

"It ought not to be; it is——" He could not finish the sentence, and the china figures were again his resource. Then he went on with a rapidity which did not allow a pause for self-recollection: "I have wished very much to talk to some one; no one will understand me as well as you. It is all over; quite. You must not for an instant think it is not; because I don't always command myself. It was a dream. I was rudely awakened; but no matter for that. I beg you and all my friends not to spare me. I don't intend to spare myself. I shall not shun——" a momentary

choking in the throat stopped him ; he began again, " I shall not shun Helen —— "

Mrs. Graham gave him her hand, and he held it as he added, " The sooner we learn to meet in public the better. "

" Perhaps so, " said Mrs. Graham, thoughtfully ; " though Helen can never see you without self-reproach. "

He answered quickly, " The first wrong was mine. I did not accept her own words. "

" Yet I should like you to feel that she is sorry. "

A change came over his countenance. He shrank from the word as if he had been stung.

" The expression sounds cold, " said Mrs. Graham.

" I don't want her to be sorry ; I would rather she should not think about me. "

" Not in the way of repentance ? "

He looked up gravely, and answered, " Yes, in that way, if —— " the words came slowly, — " if it might be. " There was a long pause of consideration on both sides, and Claude once more took up his hat, and departed.

CHAPTER XLVII.

VERY handsome, but rather sombre, was Lady Augusta Clare's house in Grosvenor Place. It had lately been fitted up especially to meet her wishes. She liked little singularities ; and when all the world took a fancy to gilding and bright colours, it was a mark of quiet and independent taste to be devoted to drab, crimson, and oak. And the sober hue of the mansion was in accordance with what might have been called Lady Augusta's present tone of mind, if her mind had really possessed any tone of its own, and had not simply echoed that of others. Severity was now her profession ; severity in manners, music, literature, and art. Dinner parties, balls, and concerts, were given as in former days, but always with a lamentation over the necessity. Her dress was magnificent, but the silks and satins were brown or grey. She lavished a fortune upon ornaments for her person and her house, but they had always, as she sometimes was heard to say, a religious tendency. Symptoms of all this might have been remarked in her before, but the characteristics were now *strongly* developed. They might have been traced in her

features. The sharp nose was sharpened, the lines of the mouth were more deeply indented, and the words which were uttered escaped with increased force from the compressed lips. But it was the forehead which perhaps indicated the most plainly the peculiarities of Lady Augusta's present character. It had a settled censuring frown, which yet only served to enhance the striking impression made by her countenance. It was one remarkable thing about Lady Augusta Clare, that whatever belonged to her, whether it was natural or acquired, suited her. As she had been formerly the blandest and most condescending, so was she now the handsomest, most dignified, as well as the most severe of matrons; and the frown, instead of appearing as an indication of temper, was simply the result of that mournful quick-sightedness in regard to human weakness, which was the natural consequence of her own exalted virtues.

Probably if it had not assumed that character it would ere this have been smoothed away. No one was a better judge of the effect produced by her own appearance than Lady Augusta Clare.

Helen and Lady Augusta were a great contrast as they sat together in a small, rather dark room, adjoining the drawing-room, filled with books and some few good paintings of a sacred cast. Lady Augusta, in her dark purple dress, almost black; very tall, very upright, very well satisfied with herself, with enough to do and to think of;—Helen, dressed in a light blue muslin, pale, languid, listless; a shadow of her former self, reclining in an easy-chair, and appearing scarcely to have power to turn over the pages of a novel. Both were reading, or appearing to read; but Lady Augusta's eye steadily followed line after line a volume of religious biography, whilst Helen discursively wandered from one page to another, often passing over several together, and occasionally looking at the end.

Presently Lady Augusta said: "Helen, is that all you intend to do this morning?"

"Yes; till Madame Reinhard comes," was Helen's short reply.

"I thought you were going to study history for her?"

"I may after she has been here; I can't begin for myself."

"But you can acquire facts," said Lady Augusta.

"I don't want facts, but philosophy," replied Helen. "I don't think you quite understand, mamma."

"One thing I can quite understand, Helen: that you are wasting your time."

"It is useless to attempt to control one's mind," said Helen; "if it won't think, it won't. Madame Reinhard will set me to work."

"And occupy you all day," said Lady Augusta. "This German mania is carried too far; it must be stopped."

"If there is truth in it," said Helen: "it will be impossible to stop it."

For the first time she spoke in her natural, eager tone. Before, the words were dragged from her.

"Madame Reinhard's ideas are dangerous," said Lady Augusta; "she loses herself in labyrinths."

"So does Miss Manners," answered Helen.

"Not in the same way," replied Lady Augusta. "Her theories are only theories."

"And Madame Reinhard's are carried into practice," exclaimed Helen. "Give me practice, not theory."

"And yet the moment I introduce a practical person to you, you shrink back," said Lady Augusta.

"Never from the practice," said Helen, coldly; "only from the unreality."

"I don't know what you mean by unreality, Helen. It is a cant phrase of the present day."

"I don't know any other to use," replied Helen indifferently.

"Mamma, we need not go on talking in this way."

"I beg your pardon, Helen. As I am responsible for your views, I wish to comprehend them."

"I have no views, mamma; only I hate narrowness and pettiness."

"Going to church and being reverential, for instance," said Lady Augusta.

"Making goodness consist in such things as this," said Helen; taking up an elaborate piece of work intended as the border of an altar carpet.

"I make no answer to your sneers, Helen. I am accustomed to them. But since you are so bent upon being practical, I will put your principle to the test. You will go to Miss Manners' soirée?"

"If Madame Reinhard intends to be there," replied Helen.

Lady Augusta's cold eye sparkled, as she exclaimed: "If it is my will, you mean."

"Then," replied Helen, "there could be no need to put the question to me."

"Yet I was willing to give you the opportunity of pleasing me by your own free will."

"I have none, mamma."

"None! when every hour in the day you exhibit it?"

"None," repeated Helen. "If I had, I should not be here."

"You don't mean, Helen, that you still cling to that absurd fancy of remaining at Ivors; now, when I have made, and am daily making, such sacrifices for you?"

"I wish for no sacrifice but one, mamma; to be left alone."

"To brood over fancies, and waste your powers in metaphysics," exclaimed Lady Augusta.

"As well in that as in gold thread and floss silk," said Helen, again pointing to the border of the altar carpet.

"To be the mark for ridicule," continued Lady Augusta; her words being uttered with greater sharpness. "To make yourself disagreeable to the persons whom your father and I most desire you to please. To rehearse again, in fact, the part which has been your public disgrace."

Helen roused herself from her leaning attitude and paused before she spoke; then she said, "Mamma, you need have no fear on that point. I shall never treat another man as I treated Claude."

"I should be glad to think so," replied Lady Augusta. "You will then be more willing to listen to what your father and I have to say."

"Is it any thing particular, mamma?" asked Helen, abruptly; whilst she moved so as to face Lady Augusta, and regarded her with a steady and fixed gaze.

"I am doubtful whether I ought to tell you; but it may be as well to be open. Captain Mordaunt has proposed for you to your father."

"Has he?" said Helen. Not a muscle of her face moved.

"He has," replied Lady Augusta, emphatically. "He has behaved as few men in his circumstances would have done; he has placed himself entirely in your father's hands."

"He is wise in that," said Helen. "He may have hope with my father; he would have none with me."

"You are ungrateful, Helen."

"I see no ingratitude."

"Not in the way in which you receive the offer of affection?"

"If it were affection, I would be grateful for it," replied Helen.

"But, as it happens, I can appreciate exactly the value of Captain Mordaunt's professions. He has known me some time, and likes me in a certain way. He thinks I am not absolutely ugly or dull. It pleases him to hear me sing; and we can carry on a sufficiently lively conversation in a ball-room. Moreover, our families are

connected, and I am likely to have a tolerable fortune. Altogether, he thinks that I shall some day make a very presentable Countess of Harford. I may be conceited, mamma, but I estimate myself rather above all this; therefore I am not grateful, but the contrary."

"Helen, your satire is really unbearable."

"I am sorry for it: but, unfortunately, truth is often the greatest satire. My father, I suppose, is quite prepared for my answer."

"None is required," replied Lady Augusta. "Captain Mordaunt asks only that he may be admitted to the house to endeavour to make his own way: that, of course, you could not refuse."

"It is indifferent to me," replied Helen. "Whether one man or another may choose to pay me attentions can be of little consequence, except for the trouble of the moment." She took out her watch. "Half-past twelve. Madame Reinhard will be here directly."

Lady Augusta detained her as she was about to leave the room. Helen thought she was going to speak again of Captain Mordaunt; but no notice was taken of the last remark, and Lady Augusta only said: "I have accepted the invitation for Miss Manners' soirée. I mean to drive to Curzon Street after church this afternoon, and then I shall learn who are likely to be present. I should wish you, therefore, to go out with me."

"The carriage may call for me when you return from church," said Helen.

"It will take up time," replied Lady Augusta.

"Only five minutes; and I have engagements till then."

"With Madame Reinhard?"

"It may be; I can't answer for it."

"I wish to know," said Lady Augusta.

Helen's cheek flushed with anger. "Yes, with Madame Reinhard," she said; and Lady Augusta allowed her to go.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

HELEN would scarcely have been supposed to be the same person, if—about a quarter of an hour after her conversation with Lady Augusta—she had been seen sitting by the side of Madame Reinhard, and looking over the same book with her. She had been

sharply on the defensive during that uncomfortable interview with her step-mother: all the worst points of her character standing out in strong relief, as they always did when she was brought in contact with Lady Augusta. We all, so it seems, exercise distinct influences upon each other, and call forth more or less some peculiar characteristics, either congenial or antagonistic. Lady Augusta, of late, had done this in a very marked way. She roused Helen to opposition, even when there was nothing to oppose. It was a struggle for supremacy between two strong wills; but Lady Augusta added knowledge of the world to hers, and so in most cases it was victorious. Besides, she had in general right on her side. Her faults lay much more in motive than in action; and although this effectually prevented her from having any influence over Helen, whose perception of truth in character was almost an instinct, it gave her generally the support of Sir Henry's judgment, and the approbation of the circle in which she moved; and against these it was very difficult for Helen to contend.

But Helen was at her ease now; all the cold petulance of manner, so offensive from its want of respect, was gone. She was caressing, gentle, deferential, and full of eager interest, and her affectionate cordiality was, in appearance, fully returned. Madame Reinhard might have been thirty, but she was young-looking for her age. Her countenance was very handsome at a distance; on a nearer view it had great defects, for the features were irregular; but the look of wonderful intelligence in the square forehead, and clear, dark, grey eyes, almost forbade criticism. It was a face which took the beholder, as it were, by storm, and compelled admiration. Then she had the charm of a foreign manner and foreign accent. Even trifling observations became piquant when uttered by her; and when she passed into the region of thought, her whole soul seemed to pour itself out in a rush of earnest, though sometimes vague and wild speculations, which, even if Helen could not follow them, entranced her by the fascination of power and eloquence.

No wonder that Helen was giving herself up to this new influence; she, whose life had lately been so vapid and monotonous, whose temper was becoming sharpened by domestic uncongeniality, and at the bottom of whose heart lay self-reproach, disappointed hope, and a restless longing for some unattainable joy; a heavy, heavy burden, which deadened the present, and buried the past as under the weight of a gravestone.

It was something to feel that she could be excited, though but

for a few hours ; it was much more to believe that her mind was enlarging to receive new and valuable ideas ; that she was learning to search into mysteries, and emancipate herself from prejudice.

Madame Reinhard taught her to think, and any person who does that, is felt at once to be a benefactor. And so Helen cultivated her acquaintance, at first from curiosity, then from real pleasure, now from affection. The enjoyment of her society was the only real gratification to which she had looked forward in coming to London, and even that would, she imagined, have been enhanced tenfold, if Madame Reinhard could have been prevailed upon to stay with her at Ivors, instead of remaining amongst the gay, dissipated friends, whom her husband, — a man of scientific tastes, but devoted to self-indulgence, — was in the habit of collecting around him.

“Beautiful ! it raises one’s whole nature ! If one could only feel so always !” was Helen’s exclamation, as Madame Reinhard read, with perfect emphasis and taste, a scene from Goethe’s *Torquato Tasso* ; “but one forgets often that it is possible.”

“Ah ! *meine Liebe* ! that is true ; but the sense of the beautiful deepens as the perception of it expands ; and so one learns to live a life above life.”

“But not in the midst of such pettiness as is found in this London whirl.”

“Why not ? The real beauty of humanity is the same everywhere. One has but to dig beneath the surface to find it. There are hearts to love in London as there are elsewhere. And intellect — where will you find the like ?”

“You have the power to find,” said Helen ; “you know where and how to search.”

“And so will you, *meine Freundin* ! only let your soul open, expand itself. It is contracted now, it is shut up, it cannot see ; it is fenced in by forms, by exclusiveness, by conventionalities ; that is what you call them. Listen, see what forms the noble mind:

Ein edler Mensch kann einem engen Kreise
Nicht seine Bildung danken ; Vaterland
Und Welt muss auf ihn wirken. Ruhm und Tadel
Muss er ertragen lernen. Sich und andre
Wird er gezwungen recht zu kennen. Ihn
Wiegt nicht die Einsamkeit mehr schmeichelnd ein,
Es will der Feind — es darf der Freund nicht schonen.
Dann übt der Jüngling streitend seine Kräfte ;
Fühlt was er ist, und fühlt sich bald ein Mann.”

“Yes,” and Helen’s eyes sparkled with enthusiasm, “and if I were a man, it might be.”

"*Ach!* that is the narrowness—soul is soul—be it man or woman's."

Helen sighed.

"Nay, *mein Kind*, why sigh? It is but to strive, to struggle, perhaps to wait; truth will have the victory at last. The world is working for it: women are not what they were; they are making a position for themselves; their voices are raised even now; they appeal for liberty, and it will be granted them. As the regeneration of the world approaches, the dimness is passing from the eyes of men, and they are learning to acknowledge in us the same being which lives and works in themselves."

"You are free," said Helen. "Even now you have marked out your own path, and are following it."

"Free! But the freedom would never have been bought, if I had paused to reckon the price to be paid for it." Madame Reinhard stopped for a moment, and a cloud of sorrowful thought passed over her countenance. "Yet," she added, "I am content."

Helen pressed her hand affectionately, and said: "You know I would help you if I could."

"Ah! yes, I know, but none can. I must keep it to myself; but I say again, I am content. That is what you will be, if you give yourself up to the true instincts of your nature; then you will always find companionship in the union of soul with soul, abroad, though you may fail to meet with it at home."

"But there are so few who could give me this companionship," said Helen. "I know none except yourself."

"Come with me, *meine Liebe*. I will show you. I will make you feel what mind can be; what it can work; how it can rise above this earthly atmosphere; how it can expand itself, and find communion with the great and good of all ages."

"I am a prisoner," said Helen; "I go nowhere without mamma."

"Oh! *Miladi Augusta!* she is very careful; very good; but she is narrow, narrow; you must not be shut in by her. Nothing great will flourish in that air."

"Nothing does," said Helen; "it sickens me; I can't live in it."

"Assuredly not; you were made for another life."

"I see through it," continued Helen. "Mamma calls it religion; it is no religion to me."

"Religion! no, indeed," and Madame Reinhard's eyes were lighted up by excitement; "is not religion pure, free, the adoration of the heart—the voluntary homage of the whole being? It cannot be confined by forms; it needs no mystic rites. Give

but to the conscious soul the sense of beauty and love, and it will worship everywhere. Whether standing on high, amongst the glorious mountains, or deep hidden in the secluded valley, it will recognise greatness, majesty, and power, and prostrate itself before them. And if nature is concealed from its gaze, it will search amongst the human hearts, amongst which it dwells, and see there also the same attributes of divinity, and acknowledge the same might."

Helen understood only a little of this speech, yet something in the latter sentence startled her, and she said, "One can scarcely speak of divinity in men."

"Not genius? not the undying spark, which is to kindle soul after soul for ages yet to come?" exclaimed Madame Reinhard. "Oh, Helen, are you false to that creed?"

"No, indeed," exclaimed Helen; "genius is what I long to meet; it is what I pine after. But where is it to be found, except in books?"

"You do not know, *meine Freundin*; as you say you are a prisoner; but they live still,—the men whose spirits shall work for centuries yet to come, even as he,—this great one, to whom we have now paid homage." She laid her hand upon the book which they had been reading.

"Mamma scoffs at Goethe," said Helen. "She says he was a bad man."

"*Mein armes Kind!* and are you to walk in leading strings all your life? What matters the outward life, when the inward heart is pure? And why deny the majesty of genius, because it comes to us in a form to which we are unaccustomed? Ah! the world is blind, blind."

"And you could show me men who would have power to stir my soul as he can stir it?" asked Helen, doubtfully.

"He was one, alone—we do not look for a second; we would not wish it; it would mar the grandeur of his power. But there are others,—men, aye, and women too;—come but with me, and you shall know them. They may not suit Miladi Augusta: they would not drive every day to kneel on a hard bench, in a cold church, and hear little boys groan out dull tunes without time; and they might never bow their bodies down to the ground as a sign of reverence; and, perchance, they don't know how to work the odd flowers and strange stitches, which Miladi values only just next to her prayers. But I will tell you what they will do, Helen. They will elevate you; they will make you feel what life is worth; they will carry you beyond these outward

customs ; they will teach you to recognise the presence of the good and the beautiful in all ; and they will show you how to work for freedom,—your own freedom, mine, the freedom of women, of mankind ; the emancipation of the human race from every rule but that of mind, directed by benevolence.”

“You are imagining a perfect state of things,” replied Helen, thoughtfully.

“And is not the world working towards perfection ? Look back upon past ages. That is what I want you to do : you should read history philosophically ; see how mankind has progressed. We talk of the days of chivalry ; were there not hardships then, and slavery, and cruelty, such as are never heard of now ?”

“Yes,” said Helen ; “that has often struck me.”

“And it will strike you more, if you will only think ; only suffer yourself to think. But you are a coward, Helen ; you are afraid to cast off your chains, and give an independent opinion.”

“Because I am always having them recast around me,” answered Helen. “Mamma dreads freedom. She says we ought to put ourselves under guidance in all things, and that submission and obedience are the first of duties.”

“Oh ! yes, obedience to one’s own high instincts — submission to the mighty power of mind ; but with Miladi Augusta it is not so ; it is submission to—I don’t know what.”

“Submission to herself, as far as I am concerned,” said Helen, pettishly.

“Poor, child !” Madame Reinhard became caressing ; “but it will not last, Helen.”

“I don’t see how it is to end.”

“Before long you will marry. Then you will be free.”

Helen’s colour changed. She answered quickly, “I shall never marry.”

“Never ! oh ! such a long day !” and Madame Reinhard laughed.

“I should not be happier if I were married,” continued Helen.

“You would be more free,” was the quick reply.

“No, no,” began Helen, but she was interrupted.

“Suffer me to speak, *meine Freundin*. I have more right to do so than you. It is your English laws,—your English customs which make it so. It would not be if women were independent, as they ought to be, and as they must and will be. But now you are tied ; you cannot move, unless you profess to have given up your freedom to a husband ; then you are your own mistress, or at least you may make yourself such.”

"Profess !" repeated Helen, thoughtfully. The word jarred upon her sense of truth.

A slight sneer passed over Madame Reinhard's face. "You are so fanciful, *mein Kind*. What is in your little mind ?"

"That, if people profess, I suppose they are bound to practice," said Helen ; "though I should never like it."

"Ah ! that old-fashioned notion ! it dates from the deluge. But, *meine Liebe*, the world has grown wiser since those days. We obey where we love, that I grant you."

"And women are supposed always to love their husbands," said Helen.

Madame Reinhard's answer was a kiss, so fond that the shade which had gathered upon Helen's face vanished. She turned again to Goethe, and her full, melodious voice carried Helen on, as in a dream of enchantment, whilst they read of love and genius, high aspirations, and mournful passionate struggles against suffering and oppression. So naturally was all described, so entirely were the feelings depicted considered to be matters of course, that Helen, in her simplicity, never paused to inquire whether underneath there lay the recognition of God's moral law. Nothing offended her taste ; she did not ask, therefore, whether any thing ought to offend her principles ; and when Madame Reinhard concluded by an eloquent eulogium upon Goethe, Helen was quite prepared to agree with her, and to believe that Lady Augusta's condemnation was to be traced entirely to, what Madame Reinhard termed, her narrowness.

CHAPTER XLIX.

HELEN had many such conversations with Madame Reinhard. They all ended in a similar way, with no definite results, at least none which could be perceived ; only Helen grew more discontented, more abstracted, more wilful, and, when alone, more unhappy. Madame Reinhard's society was a species of intoxication ; it excited her for the moment, but it left depression and restlessness behind. Helen thought that it was because in her alone she could find congeniality, and therefore she was always forming plans for meeting ; and when they did meet, either in public or private, devoting herself to her, to the exclusion of all other interests.

Lady Augusta complained, and put difficulties in the way: but she had no arguments to bring forward against the friendship strong enough to convince Helen's reason. She had encouraged the acquaintance at first, because Madame Reinhard had the reputation of talent and fashion; and now, all that she could say against her was refuted by the very words which she had herself used when it was proposed that she should visit Ivors.

Yet Lady Augusta had right on her side,—more right than even she herself entirely understood. One thing only she knew,—the discovery had been made quite recently, since she came to London;—the society which met at Madame Reinhard's house was not such as she could herself tolerate, or with which Helen could ever be allowed to mix.

Where the fault lay no one seemed to know. Madame Reinhard said it was in her husband; that she was obliged to submit to his will; that she did so most unwillingly: and her lamentations, added to her talents, and the fascination of her manners, induced the indifferent and selfish world to accept her apologies, and to believe that she was a victim to her husband's tyranny.

But Lady Augusta's professions of religion and strictness of conduct could not thus be satisfied. It was against her will that Madame Reinhard was Helen's friend, yet not in the least because she feared the influence of her principles. It was simply because in the set amongst which it was her pleasure to move the acquaintance was condemned. Madame Reinhard was looked upon coldly by certain persons, the leaders of Lady Augusta's religious world;—a great deal was said of the mischief of latitudinarian principles; hints given of tendency to scepticism, and anecdotes related of the neglect of all outward religious observances in Madame Reinhard's household. Helen believed nothing of all this. She declared that it was religious gossip, which she hated much more than that which was worldly. Now and then she repeated the stories to Madame Reinhard, who received them as matters of course, and answered them either by a quiet smile of contempt, or an eloquent tirade against narrow-mindedness.

It would have been difficult, indeed, for Helen to doubt her; she had such a flow of words at command,—such high-sounding phrases and plausible excuses. And then her sympathies were so large! She seemed the very personification of charity. There was no form of belief or unbelief which she could not tolerate, except that which, in the slightest degree, attempted to put bounds to toleration. And this was very charming to Helen, who was daily learning from Lady Augusta to consider that all persons

who endeavour to limit the range of truth were bent upon destroying its essence, and making it to consist in certain mysterious outward ceremonials, in which the heart had no share. True, Madame Reinhard was seldom or never seen at any place of public worship, except the Roman Catholic, which she sometimes frequented, as she openly confessed, for the sake of the music; but who could deny that it is possible to worship quite as devoutly in the solitude of one's own chamber as in the most splendid cathedral? And Madame Reinhard could speak, and did speak, so fervently upon the most solemn subjects,—communion with the Supreme Being—dependence upon Him—thirsting after union with His exalted Nature,—that Helen naturally concluded any eccentricities in outward conduct to be the result of education and foreign habits. She had no doubt in her own mind that there was much more real feeling in Madame Reinhard's religion than in Lady Augusta's, and much more spirituality (the term was vague, but it expressed to herself what she meant) than in Mrs. Graham's.

Madame Reinhard's singularities were also confessed openly. She owned that she held some singular opinions about the Bible,—that is, they would have been singular in former days,—but they were now, as she asserted, rapidly becoming general. She talked of myths, and allegories, and quoted Niebuhr and the legends of the early Roman kings, by way of illustration; but then she admired the Bible extremely,—indeed she was quite enthusiastic about it. There was no poetry, she declared, equal to Isaiah,—nothing to be found in the whole compass of literature grander than certain descriptions in the Book of Revelations; and above all,—and it was this acknowledgment upon which she piqued herself, as if it were a homage from her own powerful mind to the force of simplicity and truth,—no life more touching, and no example more inspiring than that given in the Gospels.

Helen valued the Bible more than she had ever done before, after she had discussed it with Madame Reinhard; and when she saw Lady Augusta drive off in her luxurious carriage to the daily service in the neighbouring church, looked at her, with a kind of pitying contempt, and sat down to read at home; lulling herself into a state of dreamy excitement by the melody of her favourite chapters, and believing that she was if not outwardly as strict, certainly more sincere.

Now and then, however, though only for a moment, Helen was startled by the opinions of her new friend. Madame Reinhard's *liberality* extended itself to morals as well as religion, and here it

was not quite so easy to mislead. Helen's standard of duty might not be high; but such as it was it was based upon truth. If she failed to act up to it, yet she never excused herself, and therefore was not inclined to excuse others.

But Madame Reinhard had excuses always ready for herself and every one else, and not only excuses but reasonings, mistifying palliations, sophistical arguments, which confounded the distinctive lines of right and wrong, until it was next to impossible to separate them. And this was at first displeasing to Helen. It gave her an uncomfortable feeling of insecurity. When a man of powerful intellect and great genius, full of the most exalted aspirations, sank himself to the level of the lowest of mankind by a vicious life, and she was told that she had no right to censure, because minds of such a stamp could not be judged by ordinary rules, she yielded to the argument, because she had so little knowledge of the binding force of the eternal laws of God, that she had scarcely any thing to say against it. But it was not the sophistry of days or weeks which could satisfy the misgiving of something wrong that rested at the bottom of her heart. Helen believed, only because she wished to believe. In her inmost soul she felt that no genius, be it ever so great, can balance even with a feather's weight the power of moral worth; yet, according to Madame Reinhard's creed, she looked upon genius, even though unconnected with goodness, as an emanation from God, to be revered and worshipped for itself; and as such submitted to its influence, without allowing herself to inquire too minutely into the right upon which its authority was based.

All this was doing her infinite harm; but she was not in the least aware of it. She was unhappy, that she knew, but many sources existed to which this fact might be traced, besides that of an ill-regulated mind.

One there was especially, scarcely acknowledged by Helen, yet ever present with her. Madame Reinhard fostered it insensibly. She was always talking to Helen of love. She looked upon it not only as a necessary ingredient in human happiness, but as essential to the perfection of the human character. Helen often said that she should never marry, yet Madame Reinhard's conversation, added to her own experience, made her feel that, unmarried, she must be miserable; and then she looked round the circle of her acquaintance with a cold, criticising, scornful eye, and the aching of her heart told her that once, love,—true, pure love, such as man might approve, and God would surely bless,—had been placed within her reach, and she had rejected it.

Deeper sadness, deeper regret, lay at the bottom of Helen's heart than Madame Reinhard could reach ; but it was all buried, covered day by day, more and more, with the thick shroud of wilfulness, ignorance, and false principles, which Lady Augusta's insincerity and Madame Reinhard's plausibility created and fostered.

CHAPTER L.

HELEN consented to go to Miss Mannèrs' *soirée*. Madame Reinhard had promised to be there, and Helen made a virtue of her compliance, although knowing that, under all circumstances, she would in the end have been forced to yield. It was one of a series of entertainments which Miss Mannèrs was endeavouring to bring into fashion. Strictly literary, she called it : tea, coffee, ices, lectures, conversation, and supper. And there were certainly the germs of very agreeable society to be found in it ; the misfortune being, as Claude Egerton had suggested, that almost every one wished to exhibit his or her peculiar talents, instead of enjoying those of others. On this occasion, however, there was greater prospect of satisfaction than usual. A lecture was to be given by one with whom no one could compete ; a scientific man, and a traveller, who had been working very successfully for the civilisation of a barbarous and heathen people. Madame Reinhard entered warmly into the cause ; only lamenting that Mr. Randolph was a little inclined to be narrow in his views, and thought a bishop essential to their success. Her object in going was to become acquainted with him, and discuss the whole question ; and Helen, who cared neither for natives, travellers, nor bishops, yet pleased herself with the notion that she might hear agreeable conversation, and witness the triumph of her friend's intellect. She looked forward to the evening at last, with something really approaching to excitement ; especially when she found that Mrs. Graham, Susan, and Isabella, tempted like herself by the proposed lecture, were to be there also. Madame Reinhard had not made Helen forget Susan ; forgetfulness was not in her nature, and the tie between them had been formed too early, and cemented by too many associations, to be broken, unless by some sudden disruption. They suited, as so many husbands and wives suit, precisely because each possessed what the other wanted. Helen rested upon Susan, and Susan admired and was excited by Helen. Yet they had

met but little of late, and always unsatisfactorily. There was no barrier in the way of affection, but there was one as regarded confidence. Helen lived in the present, and deep feeling requires a past. And so they were accustomed to keep upon the surface of all subjects, each conscious of the quicksands which lay beneath.

Helen's eagerness, according to what was now becoming a natural rule, caused Lady Augusta much annoyance; although she had before urged that the invitation should be accepted. It was too provoking that Helen could not even do what was wished, without showing that she was influenced by Madame Reinhard. The feeling was shown in the first observation addressed to Helen when she appeared in the drawing-room to wait for the carriage.

"You are over-dressed, my dear. If we were going to the Duchess of Menteith's ball, you could not be more splendid."

Helen looked at herself carelessly in the glass. "Splendid! am I, mamma? I really did not think about it. I told Annette to give me the dress which Madame Reinhard admired so much the other evening, and it never struck me whether it would be particularly suitable or not; but it does not signify."

"But it does signify, Helen, extremely; nothing can be a greater mark of bad taste than being overdressed. I really wonder that, after the education you have received, you should take delight in such absurd finery."

Helen only laughed. Love of finery was the last thing of which her conscience accused her.

Lady Augusta continued: "And that vulgar German woman to encourage you in it!"

"Nay, mamma," Helen interrupted her quickly: "the vulgar German woman, as you are pleased to call her, has nothing to do with the matter. The dress was worn last week at a ball, and you chose it yourself, and Madame Reinhard praised your taste. It is my own fancy wearing it to-night; and I confess I see nothing splendid in it."

"You are not likely to do so whilst you are so devoted to the world," said Lady Augusta.

Helen again looked at her dress and smiled satirically. "It would be easy enough to overcome the world, if all that was required was to put on one dress instead of another."

"Signs," said Lady Augusta, "indicative of the spirit within." She looked complacently at her own sepulchral black satin.

"Merely signs, and so of no consequence!" retorted Helen.

"You are misled, Helen ; your mind is perverted by German mysticism. It will lead you into dangerous error."

"I am willing to run the risk," said Helen. "Satin, or brown holland, it is all the same to me, except for the spirit which is embodied in it."

"Spirit! Embodied!" repeated Lady Augusta. "Really, Helen, you talk great nonsense."

"Why do you prefer dark colours to light, mamma?" said Helen.

"I am ashamed that you should ask such a childish question. I have a regard to propriety, simplicity; I wish to show my contempt for the world."

"Then that is your spirit, mamma. Mine is to please a person I love. One is of just as much value as the other; and if my friend liked best to see me in brown holland, I would wear it."

The confession struck Lady Augusta dumb for an instant; then she said, with an air of determined authority: "Helen, it is my wish that you should change your dress."

Helen looked up angrily for a moment, but her tone was provokingly indifferent as she replied: "I can just take off this brooch, mamma, if you dislike it. It sparkles too much, I suppose, to please you."

"It is my wish that you should change your dress, Helen," repeated Lady Augusta.

"There is no time, mamma. The carriage is at the door."

Lady Augusta sat down. Helen drew on her gloves. The carriage was announced.

"I will just knock at papa's study, and see if he is ready," said Helen. "He told me he would go if he could."

"There is no use in doing that," replied Lady Augusta; "I am not going."

"Then I dare say he will take me," said Helen, without even an accent of surprise; and as she spoke the words, Sir Henry entered the room.

Lady Augusta appealed to him instantly. "Sir Henry, I must refer to your authority; your daughter is beyond my control."

She stood before the fire, the very embodiment of injured dignity.

Poor Sir Henry was becoming used to these scenes; yet they always perplexed him. He looked from one to the other. Helen went up to him playfully, and kissed him. "Dear papa, you will go with me to-night; it will be so much more pleasant if you do."

"I don't know, my dear; I can't say." He turned away from her. "Augusta, what is all this?"

"Simply that your daughter refuses to recognise my authority," was the reply.

"I can't have you silly, Helen; do as you are told to do."

And Helen, with a proud, careless laugh, answered, "I will, papa, if I know what to do; only the carriage is waiting, and we shall be late."

Sir Henry addressed his wife. "What do you wish, my dear? What is it she refuses to do?"

"I wish her to appear simply, suitably dressed," said Lady Augusta. "Such finery is fit only for an opera dancer."

Sir Henry's eye glanced quickly over his daughter's figure; but he could see nothing in Helen's handsome but very becoming dress at all worthy of such censure.

"It is a very good dress. I don't see ——" he began.

Lady Augusta interrupted him with a sigh. "Of course you don't see, my dear. You can't possibly understand the proprieties of a lady's dress. But I must beg you to believe, upon my assurance, that if Helen appears in such extravagant magnificence at a quiet literary *soirée*, she will be the laughing-stock of the room. But I am free! I have nothing to do with it! I give it up!" Lady Augusta folded her hands together with an air of touching resignation.

"Helen, my dear, go and do what your mamma wishes, directly," said Sir Henry, in the tone which Helen dreaded to disobey. And almost before the sentence was ended, Helen had disappeared — conquered.

CHAPTER LI.

"Ah! *meine Liebe!* and you are come at last? I gave you up. But so dull, so triste! Where is your beauty gone? Annette was asleep when she dressed you." Madame Reinhard had made her way to Helen, by breaking through a crowd of admiring gazers and auditors, who thought her far more interesting than the learned traveller and philanthropist. One or two followed her; amongst them Captain Mordaunt.

Helen's face was clouded: she scarcely answered.

Captain Mordaunt made some silly flattering remark about beauty unadorned, and then the cloud deepened, and Helen drew Madame Reinhard aside.

"For pity's sake save me from personal observations, especially from that man. What does it signify how I look? what I wear? I thought you would have known me better."

Madame Reinhard laughed. "So proud are we, we can't bear even praise! But I like you all the better, *mein Kind*. Only confess you are very sombre to-night; and it is so dazzling to see you when you choose to make the most of yourself."

"I have no choice; I am a puppet," said Helen.

"Ah! *Miladi Augusta*! she likes that burial gown. But she should not put it upon you; you must rebel."

"I don't care enough about it," said Helen, with assumed indifference. "But don't talk about it; it is an odious subject."

"It is no matter, except for freedom," continued Madame Reinhard; "that weighs upon me, I own. I long to see you free."

"Parents before marriage, husbands after; where is the freedom of a woman in England?" said Helen; "unless one can follow the example set one here." And she glanced at the further end of the room, where Miss Manners, in her quaint black jacket and the odd head-dress, half turban, half cap, was haranguing, in long-winded sentences, an audience whose thoughts were centred in their coffee-cups.

"That is not freedom," said Madame Reinhard, her eyes following the same direction. "She is the slave of the world's opinion. She would give up her singularity if people did not bow down before it."

"Then where is freedom to be found?" again asked Helen.

"If you say in marriage, I can't agree with you."

Madame Reinhard only smiled. "We will discuss that another time, *meine Liebe*. Look! there comes—Is not that your cousin? We saw her in the distance in the park." And Helen leaned forward, trying to distinguish, amidst the crowd near the door, who might be entering. They were silent for a moment; then Madame Reinhard laid her hand upon Helen's arm, and said emphatically, "Remember, whatever I think, I will never acknowledge that hearts can be constrained to love by vows. It is all words,—useless. If they love, they love; and their wills are one. If they don't love, then must each heart be free."

Helen looked round with an expression of surprise and alarm.

Madame Reinhard laughed heartily. "Ah! I shock you! you misunderstand. Of course we all keep to outward forms; we go on very well together, that is necessary. All I mean is, that vows can't make us love, if we don't love."

"Then we have no business to marry," said Helen, quickly,

and as the words were uttered, a pang shot through her heart, caused by many mingled feelings and recollections, which she dared not face.

"*Ça depend*," was Madame Reinhard's reply. "Where will you find the hero, the grand one, worthy of you, able also to have you? but are you, therefore, to be a slave to Miladi Augusta, and her burial gown?"

Helen's lips moved as if she would reply, but the answer was unspoken. A sudden paleness overspread her face, and drawing back hastily, she sat down on the nearest chair.

"Ah! what can be the matter? you are ill. Speak, *meine Liebe*." Madame Reinhard bent over the chair.

Helen's eyes were fixed upon her eagerly and entreatingly. "Stand before me, don't let me be seen."

"My child, no, if you would rather not. But what for do you wish to hide yourself?"

A little reproach was to be distinguished in Madame Reinhard's tone, as she found herself in the background, unable to see or be seen. "You should rouse yourself, Helen. See, who is that? Ah! *quel grand homme*!"

A slight movement opened the way before them, and Claude Egerton for the first time caught sight of Helen.

He did not appear startled: she could have borne it better if he had. He drew near with his firm tread, his self-controlled manner; that manner which she had sometimes watched when exhibited to others, and wondered whether it would be possible for any one unacquainted with him to guess the depth of tenderness beneath; and each step seemed to thrill her brain, whilst a mist covered her eyes.

She tried to be brave; she tried to look at him, to meet him, as it seemed he could meet her; but the shame, the overpowering, crushing sense of shame, the remembrance that once,—though only in the excitement of goaded feeling,—she had forgotten a woman's dignity and truth, was too much for her; and hastily rising from her seat, she made her escape through the crowd to the farther end of the room, followed by Madame Reinhard's frightened look, and eager question: "Helen, *meine Liebe*, are you mad?"

But Helen thought only of being alone and unnoticed. It was all she cared for, all she longed for,—to look at him in the distance, to observe him, unperceived: then for an instant there came the strong impulse to throw herself at his feet, and ask him if he could forgive, if he did not utterly despise her, succeeded by the

heavy sense of humiliation, which whispered that some offences might be forgiven, but could never, never be forgotten. She sat down, trembling: she thought that she would summon her resolution and speak to him. She watched lest he should again draw near, but the lecture began, and all attention but her own was engrossed by it.

It was interesting from the commencement; towards the conclusion it became absorbing, yet less from the eloquence of the speaker or the facts he narrated, than because his heart was in his subject, and he carried other hearts with him.

When it was ended, a number of persons gathered around the lecturer, Madame Reinhard amongst them. She took a prominent part in the conversation; her bright eyes sparkled with almost dazzling brilliancy, and her changing voice gave utterance to question, remark, and repartee, with wonderful and exciting rapidity. And by her side now stood Helen, no longer humbled, crushed, by the sense of her own littleness, but eager, excited, scarcely inferior to Madame Reinhard in talent, yet exhibiting it as unconsciously as her beauty. Her voice, indeed, trembled at times, when a dark face, almost severe in its expression, was to be seen far in the background; but Helen, when she caught the glance, turned pale for an instant, and then talked only the more rapidly, and laughed the more lightly, for the pang of humiliation was over.

"You have a strange set here to-night, my dear Julia," remarked Lady Augusta, as, from the elevation of her moral and religious superiority, she condescendingly glanced around the room.

"Men of note! women of high intellectual cultivation!" replied Miss Manners; "not known, it may be, in the fashionable world, but all worthy of acquaintance, though possibly singular."

"Very!" escaped from Mrs. Graham, who happened to be near. "Pray"—and she looked towards the group with rather an anxious eye;—"there is one lady—stout, dressed in amber silk; do you see her? Madame Reinhard is just speaking to her: who is she?"

Miss Manners seemed a little embarrassed:—"Oh! that—that is the Baroness d'Olban; French, of course. I never saw her before this evening; a friend asked leave to bring her. She is peculiar."

"You should be careful, Julia," said Lady Augusta, authoritatively; "report says she gambles."

"Ah! my dear, report!—but what am I to do, if I am to listen to report? I may as well shut up my house; and there is

no doubt she is excessively intellectual—an authoress ; she has published some splendid poems.”

“She is an openly avowed infidel, I believe,” said Mrs. Graham, gravely ; and, without waiting for Miss Manners’ reply, she told Isabella to remain with Lady Augusta, and went with Susan towards the circle in the centre of which Helen had placed herself.

Madame Reinhard was concluding an eloquent speech upon the inherent rights of humanity, the danger of checking freedom of thought, the necessity of allowing every nation to develop its own powers, unshackled by forms and traditions. Even the thoughtful lecturer was listening to her with deference, whilst low murmurs of applause were heard from the admiring audience. Helen’s eyes were riveted upon Madame Reinhard ; as she ceased, she whispered, “Go on, I could listen for ever.” Madame Reinhard started, and blushed ; her piercing gaze was softened by an appearance of womanly feeling, and she drew back, saying that she was afraid she had been delivering very bold opinions. But Helen grew eager from the slight opposition ; she repeated her praise of Madame Reinhard, and added observations of her own. Animation added to her beauty ; and some of the gentlemen drew nearer, and listened attentively. Madame Reinhard, free from any petty rivalry, seemed anxious to bring her forward as her friend ; and Helen, flattered and excited, and all unconscious of the lurking vanity, felt herself more and more at ease, and talked yet more freely.

“*Elle est charmante, n’est-ce pas ?*” murmured the French Baroness to her nearest neighbour.

She was speaking to Claude. His reply was scarcely audible.

“What is her name ? I am dying to know her. I must know her,” continued the Baroness.

Claude started ; the expression of his face became suddenly fierce. Susan was nearer to him than Helen ; she was in the outer circle ; her mother had left her for a moment. He made his way to her and addressed her in an under tone.

“Is this pleasant to you ? would you rather go back to Mrs. Graham ?”

Susan raised her eyes to his with a look of cordial, simple gratitude. “Thank you, but nobody notices me, and it amuses me to listen.”

Claude glanced at Helen ;—his words came with difficulty, but he said, “Your cousin is amused also, I imagine.”

“She enjoys it,” said Susan ; “for the moment, that is.”

A look of exceeding pain came over Claude's face, whilst he gave his attention to Helen again. She was talking French fluently with a strange gentleman. There was a little timidity in her manner, which gave a peculiar charm to the quick repartee in which she was indulging. Claude's eyes were fixed on her. Susan could scarcely endure the expression of his countenance, it was so unlike himself; all tenderness was gone from it. She longed to stop Helen, yet could not move. It was a great relief when her mother's voice was heard behind her. "Susan, my love, will you come with me? supper is just ready." Claude looked round and smiled. But the next minute he was watching Helen as before. The Baroness d'Olban went up to Madame Reinhard. Claude could only have caught a few words, but he moved directly, placed himself between Helen and the Baroness, begged to be allowed to take Madame Reinhard into supper himself, and hastily, without any apology, introducing a staid, elderly gentleman to Helen, confided her to his care, and effectually prevented any introduction to the discomfited Baroness.

Madame Reinhard seated herself at the supper-table. Claude stood behind her chair. Helen and Susan were opposite. Madame Reinhard whispered to him, as he poured out a glass of wine for her: "They make a pretty contrast, one all quiet thought, the other all life and animation."

She imagined she had touched the right chord to excite him; but he only assented formally, and then, after a momentary silence, said: "May I ask if the Baroness d'Olban is your friend?"

Madame Reinhard turned so as almost to face him. "Hush!" she said; "don't you see her?" The Baroness had just entered the room, talking very loudly; and Lady Augusta, seated by Miss Manners at the head of the table, glanced at her with an expression of concentrated disgust.

Claude was not to be repelled. "I trust you will pardon me; my question is not one of mere curiosity."

Madame Reinhard put aside her plate, and rose to make room for some one behind her. "We will go," she said, "the room is hot;" and Claude led her again into the drawing-room, and stood waiting the reply to his question.

Madame Reinhard's face showed amusement mingled with satire, as she said, "You are pertinacious."

"Very, I own it."

"And if I don't choose to answer your question?"

Claude bent his head rather haughtily, and replied that of course it was entirely at Madame Reinhard's option; he had hoped, however, that she would understand him better.

A laugh preceded the reply. "Ah! you men, you English, you do take offence so soon! Did I say I would not answer? Can I care? Madame la Baronne, what is she to me?"

"Nothing, I should hope," said Claude very gravely.

A little hesitation was evident in Madame Reinhard's manner.

"You are strict," she said. "What do you know about her?"

"Perhaps it may not be advisable to tell. It can never be wise to speak of one friend to another."

"But that is too bad!" exclaimed Madame Reinhard, angrily; "I did not say she was my friend. I do not know her; I do not care for her. I—she is *mauvais ton*; she is—Miss Manners is unwise; it is not well to have her here."

"Or to introduce her to young girls without the sanction of their parents," said Claude; and he looked at Madame Reinhard with an expression so quietly stern that for one instant she seemed to shrink from it.

Yet the feeling was shaken off almost as soon as felt; and with an air of offended dignity, Madame Reinhard replied: "I do not allow hints, Mr. Egerton, even from my friends. Forgive me, if I say that we know each other slightly, and it would be better to be open."

"Most willingly," said Claude. "You are Miss Clare's friend. I also"—his voice was husky, but he went on calmly—"have known her many years. That must be my excuse for venturing to interfere. Perhaps I ought to have spoken to Lady Augusta."

Madame Reinhard interrupted him: "Speak to Miladi Augusta! But what about? Mr. Egerton, I will be angry; I will not bear this. Why speak to Miladi Augusta?"

"Merely to suggest to her that before any new acquaintance is made by her daughter, it would be well that Lady Augusta should decide whether it is likely to be a desirable one. The Baroness d'Olban can have no claim to be introduced to Miss Clare."

A gleam of sudden comprehension lighted up Madame Reinhard's face. "Ah! *ich verstehe*. But so foolish! *La pauvre Baronne!* You are jealous that she should become known to Miss Clare. *Ich verstehe!* And did you really think it would be?—it was not right, Mr. Egerton; it was not fair." Madame Reinhard spoke in a tone of just irritation.

"If I were mistaken," said Claude, in a softened voice, "you must pardon me. I certainly caught a few words which made me think that you were about to comply with some request."

"Some request! You men are so suspicious.—The Baroness would not venture.—She knows me so little, she would not dare

to take the liberty.—We do not meet; we are not acquainted, except—very slight, very slight, indeed.” Madame Reinhard’s eyes were raised to Claude’s face fully, simply, so that he could not doubt her.

The change in his countenance and manner was very marked. “Then you are not her friend,” he said, “and I may warn you against her. As a man I hear more than you are likely to do. I need not enter into particulars; but it is well known that she gambles frightfully, that her society is any thing but select, that she is——”

“*Un esprit fort?*” said Madame Reinhard, with a peculiar accent of sarcasm upon the words.

“Yes, that, and much else, which it is most undesirable for a woman to be. How she came here to-night, I can’t imagine.”

“Ah! Miss Manners! she does worship intellect,” said Madame Reinhard; “and the Baroness is stupendous.”

“So it is said. I have looked into her poems, and can only account for much which I found there by supposing a tendency to insanity.”

“But you are not in earnest?” exclaimed Madame Reinhard. Then observing his grave expression, she added, almost as gravely, “But I have read very little.”

“And you will not read more, I hope,” said Claude, earnestly; “there is much in them likely to do immense mischief.”

“Ah! yes, to some—the young. But I, an old married woman——;” and Madame Reinhard laughed, and added, “but you must not fear, and you must ask me to forgive, for you did me wrong.”

Claude held out his hand, and said, “I do ask for forgiveness; but I think I have an excuse. I could not bear any person, any young lady with whom I might have even a slight acquaintance, to be brought in contact with such a person.”

Madame Reinhard’s smile was not quite satisfactory to Claude. She murmured to herself, “*La pauvre Baronne!*” and then remarking that it was late, begged Claude to inquire if her carriage had been announced.

Lady Augusta returned home very much out of humour. Sir Henry took his candlestick and retired, with only one remark, that Mr. Randolph was a first-rate speaker and would make a capital figure in the House. Helen was about to follow his example, but she was seized upon for a lecture.

“Wait a minute, my dear, I have something to say to you;” and Helen sat down. “Your behaviour to-night has not pleased

me. I don't choose to have such a show of independence. Madame Reinhard may be a very good woman, but I can't allow of your devoting yourself exclusively to her. Your cousin Susan was quite neglected. Captain Mordaunt was treated with actual incivility."

Helen answered hastily: "Mamma, you may criticise my conduct towards Susan as much as you please. She understands me too well to be offended. Towards Captain Mordaunt, I must and will consult only my own feelings, my sense of what is true and dignified."

"There is little need to tell me, Helen, that you will follow your own will; that is shown by every look and action. Even your dress——"

Helen grasped the arm of her chair tightly, and her lips moved, but she did not speak.

"Even your dress," continued Lady Augusta, "is nothing but an exaggeration and caricature. I suppose because I found fault, justly, with your uncalled-for magnificence, you chose to appear so entirely without ornament that Julia Manners even remarked it."

"I was late," replied Helen, in a tone of smothered resentment; "there was no time for ornament."

"A paltry excuse, Helen! unworthy of you! But it is all part of the same determination. You have but one object in life,—to thwart me."

"May I be allowed to go to bed, mamma?" replied Helen. She stood up with the lighted candle in her hand.

Lady Augusta vouchsafed no reply, and Helen went to her room in towering indignation.

Bondage! the bondage of married life! it could be nothing to this. No vows, no promises, no duties could be so galling as this perpetual tutelage; and to last—how long? For years and years—through youth and middle life, it might be; in all probability it would be. Surely Madame Reinhard was right. There was no freedom in England for an unmarried woman in her parents' house. Let her age and experience be what it might, those who had been accustomed to treat her as a child would still continue to do so, and the world would look upon her as such. Madame Reinhard was not so many years older, but she was free. She went where she liked, did as she liked, chose her own friends, her own society, read her own books, gave her intellect free scope. It was all the charm of that magic word, Madame. Under the shelter of subjection she was free; and Helen might be free also, more free even than Madame Reinhard, whose husband, it was

whispered, was often ill-tempered and exacting. One word, and the simple, vapid, devoted Captain Mordaunt would lay at her feet his fortune, his expectations, his prospective title, all that could give her independence in the world, and ask only in return a nominal submission. In her grievous inconsistency, Helen allowed herself to meditate upon the possibility, until a remembrance of the past flashed across her mind, and the image of Claude Egerton, as she had that night seen him, rose up before her. All excitement was gone then—all hope, all feeling, but that heavy, overwhelming sense of shame. No, the freedom which she had pictured could never give her happiness.

CHAPTER LII.

"TIRED, my child?" said Mrs. Graham, as Susan sat at work the next morning, looking pale, and almost out of spirits.

"A little, mamma; but I think my mind is more tired than my body. It always is after I have been at a party."

"There could not have been much to tire you last night," observed Anna, drawing near Susan and appearing quite relieved at the prospect of a little conversation. "You seem to me to have done nothing but sit still and listen to what one might just as well read in a review."

"Lectures are different from reviews, though," observed Isabella. "You would understand it, Anna, if you had been with us last night. I might have read precisely the same words in a book and they would have had no effect upon me."

"Words read come to one through the medium of one's own mind, words spoken through that of the speaker. I suppose that makes the difference," replied Mrs. Graham. "But, Susan, the lecture did not tire you?"

"Oh, no, mamma! I could have listened for another hour. But thinking, and wondering, and looking at every body,—that is the fatigue in society. I am always trying to understand people, and I never can. That strange French Baroness, and Madame Reinhard, and Helen, and Mr. Egerton,—they are all such mysteries."

"Madame Reinhard is fascinating," said Isabella. "I don't wonder at Helen's being so bewitched with her."

"Mamma looks grave," observed Anna; "she doesn't like *Madame Reinhard*."

"And Mr. Egerton does not," observed Susan.

"I admire her," replied Mrs. Graham.

"Oh, mamma! that is so cold!" exclaimed Isabella.

"You would not have me say I love her, my dear child, when I have not seen her above half-a-dozen times in my life."

"But she is so clever, so brilliant, and original. She has real genius! Mamma, one must delight in genius."

"Madame Reinhard's genius would disappoint me, I am sure," said Susan.

"Because you are so prosaic, Susan. You can't separate what people feel and think from what they do."

"It is rather difficult, I own," replied Susan, quietly. "But, mamma,"—and she turned to her mother,—"*is genius, or talent, or intellect of any kind, to be admired for itself? That is what I have been thinking about all the morning.*"

"And all last night too, I suspect," exclaimed Anna. "What do you think, mamma, was Susan's observation when she woke me up from my comfortable sleep at one o'clock this morning? 'I am very glad I don't live with geniuses; I am sure I should be very wicked if I did.'"

"Possibly Susan had arrived at a right conclusion," replied Mrs. Graham, laughing; "though it was very unmerciful to trouble you with it at such an irrational hour."

"But, mamma, mamma!" exclaimed Isabella; "*genius make one wicked? How can it? It is divine! it comes from God!*"

"So you may say of personal beauty, which we are all apt to estimate wrongly," replied Mrs. Graham.

"But you cannot put that on a par with genius!" exclaimed Isabella.

"Certainly not; only as it is a gift of God it is worthy of admiration, and we do admire it. Any thing which raises a man above his fellows, even physical force alone, will excite the feeling. If we could see a giant tear up a tree by its roots, we should admire him."

"Oh! yes, mamma! with a certain kind of admiration," replied Isabella, in a disappointed tone. "But who would care for that?"

"No one with any appreciation of that which is really admirable, my dear child. Yet I am saying, I think, what is true. The feelings seem to me to rest on the same basis, the sense of power, and only to differ in degree."

Even Anna was startled by this, and broke in suddenly with an expression of dissent.

"I suppose," said Mrs. Graham, quietly, "the highest intellect

and most consummate genius in the universe, putting aside— if one may venture so to say— the intellect of the Supreme Being, is that of Satan.”

There was a momentary silence, and some expression of pain on Isabella's face; then she said in a low voice, “But we could never worship that.”

“I am not so sure, my love. I question whether, if we could analyse our feelings, we should not all find that admiration, approaching to worship, is mixed up with our idea of Satan—not admiration of his wickedness, but of his intellect and power: the same feeling, in fact, which shows itself more plainly in the homage we pay to what we often call greatness in our fellow-creatures; to Napoleon, for instance, or Alexander the Great; or perhaps to intellectual superiority only, as in Goethe, or Dante, or Shakspeare.”

“Goethe, and Dante, and Shakspeare! But, mamma, they were so different!” exclaimed Anna.

“Yet we—meaning by we, the people of this present age—are in the habit of placing them in the same category, my love. The question of moral worth does not weigh with us. They were great, therefore they were to be revered. Satan also is great, therefore he is to be revered. The feeling is perfectly natural; and we find that in heathen countries it does actually develope itself into devil worship—the worship of power apart from goodness.”

Isabella looked extremely shocked; and Anna remarked that it was a very perplexing subject, for in the Bible the ten talents obtained the highest reward, which, of course, showed that superiority of any kind must be an advantage.

“But then they gained ten talents more,” remarked Susan.

“Yes,” replied Mrs. Graham; “as our Lord says, ‘To whom much is given, of him will be much required.’ And the *much* Anna, must be not what the world estimates, but what God estimates. We are expressly told that ‘not many wise men after the flesh are called;’ and that ‘God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.’ If these words mean any thing they must mean that the talents which God will reward are not intellectual, but moral.”

“But those who had the most given them were to obtain the highest glory,” persisted Isabella.

“Certainly, dear child. But then we must all allow that great advantages involve great risks and temptations. Therefore, if the ten talents gained ten more, there must have been greater

watchfulness and earnestness than in the case of the five talents, which gained five."

"But supposing the ten talents had only gained two or three?" said Susan, thoughtfully.

"Then surely, my love, they would have fallen far short of the purpose for which they were given, and so the person who possessed them would have been worthy rather of blame than reward. Remember, I am only carrying out our Lord's parable, —not supposing that we can really be any thing but unprofitable servants at the best."

"I think I see," observed Isabella, a little unwillingly; "but it is very difficult exactly to measure what every one has done and what he might have done."

"Not only difficult, but impossible," observed Mrs. Graham. "Talents in the Bible, as we all know, mean every kind of advantage; and we can neither tell what talents others possess, nor what use they make of them really. But the tendency in the present day is to call a man's intellectual gifts his talents, and to reverence him according to the amount bestowed, and not according to the use made of them. There lies the danger."

"But I would not reverence the man, but only his gifts," said Isabella.

"Very plausible, my love; but not very possible. When you think of a man, you must think of him as a whole; you may analyse, and divide, and make metaphysical distinctions in abstract reasoning,—but the very oneness of our being, which constitutes our personal identity, compels us to feel towards each individual as *one*, to form one idea of him; and if this idea be mingled with reverence, from whatever cause, we do reverence the man, and not his gifts. Think, for instance, of any person, past or present,—Napoleon, William the Conqueror, or any individual of your acquaintance. If it were not for this power of forming one conception of the individual, combining all you know of his powers, intellectual, physical, and moral, collecting, as it were, the essence from his being, you would really have no idea of him at all. He would be to you merely different phases of a living creature,—a succession of phantoms, as he may have appeared at different periods of his life. There must be something distinct and beyond all this; and if you try to describe any person, you will feel that there is. You may say he is passionate, generous, clever, moody, fastidious, any thing you like; but you will feel all the time, that you are not really making the person to whom you are talking understand your idea of the man. It is

this *idea*, or rather this reality,—for no doubt it is in its nature a reality,—which excites your feeling of whatever kind ; and if this should be reverence, you do, and must, reverence the man,—the essential, individual, man ; and if he be not worthy of reverence, if his will be not in accordance with God's will, and his heart subject to God's law, then you are allowing yourself to honour that which is not honoured by God."

Isabella looked very grave, and said, that it was next to impossible not to admire talent of any kind, and still more genius.

"I don't object to your admiring it, my love," replied Mrs. Graham ; "admire it, if you will, as you do a beautiful face, or a beautiful picture ; but don't let reverence be mixed up with admiration."

"Don't worship Madame Reinhard," said Anna, laughing.

"Mamma does not like us to be personal," replied Isabella, rather quickly.

"Unless there may be some good reason for it," observed Mrs. Graham. "I am very willing to give you my opinion of Madame Reinhard, and you can judge for yourselves, as you see more of her, whether I am right. I think she is brilliant, but rather superficial ; with a great many good qualities, which unfortunately want a foundation, and so are perhaps only the more likely to lead her astray."

"So very, very cold, mamma !" exclaimed Isabella.

"My love, I really can't be enthusiastic about any person, when I see that self-indulgence, instead of self-denial, is the rule of life."

"Does Madame Reinhard lie on sofas, and eat and drink a great deal ?" asked Anna, satirically.

Isabella gave an indignant negative.

Susan smiled, and said, that even according to Helen's account, Madame Reinhard was not indifferent to the comforts of life.

"And why should she be ?" inquired Isabella. "Mamma, you don't uphold asceticism."

"Because I believe that very often there is a good deal of self-conceit and spiritual pride concealed beneath it, my love. But I do most entirely uphold that self-restraint, which never allows enjoyments to get the mastery over us ; which can give them up when required, either by reason or religion. But really, Anna, as regards Madame Reinhard, I was thinking much more of intellectual than physical self-indulgence."

"Yes ; I suppose she is not likely to be tempted by wine and cigars," said Anna, laughing.

"But she would allow them to others," observed Susan, quickly.
"Vivre et laissez vivre, is her motto."

"She is charitable," said Isabella.

"Because she requires charity herself," observed Anna.
 "Mamma, is not that true?"

Mrs. Graham only smiled.

"Mamma, now, you must answer," continued Anna.

"Well! if I must, I will say that I don't think it can be true charity which puts aside the laws of God. Therefore, if we have strict rules for ourselves, we must, I suppose, necessarily be somewhat strict with our neighbours. We may make excuses for them, but we must not call wrong right. And self-indulgence of any kind is unquestionably wrong."

Mrs. Graham moved, intending to go away, but Isabella detained her: "One more word, mamma. Intellectual self-indulgence! I don't understand what you mean by it."

"The enjoyment of intellect without regard to religion and morality," replied Mrs. Graham. "I have heard Madame Reinhard acknowledge that she reads books which no woman ought to read, merely because they are clever. I have heard her speak enthusiastically in praise of persons whose lives are openly scandalous, for the same reason; and I am afraid she courts their society. She confesses that she studies only for the purpose of pleasing herself, and that she can see no other use or object in study. Now all this, Anna, must be pernicious; it must lower a person's standard of right, and it is undoubtedly based upon selfishness. Of course I should not speak so freely of Madame Reinhard to any one else; but you must meet her occasionally, and you are very likely to be fascinated by her, as Helen is, and so I would rather put you on your guard beforehand."

"I think I would rather not have been put on my guard," said Isabella, when her mother left the room.

And Susan looked up from her work, and added; "I heard Mr. Egerton say very much the same as mamma a few evenings since."

CHAPTER LIII.

"Ah! *mein liebes Herz!* alone, and thinking! may I know the thoughts?"

Helen had not seen Madame Reinhard for two days, and she

looked up with pleasure at the sound of her voice ; but there was still something sad in the expression of her countenance.

"My thoughts would be of no use to you," was her reply ; "you would not understand them."

"But that is judging beforehand ; and I may be wiser than you think. Suppose I could guess ?"

"Impossible !" exclaimed Helen, quickly.

"And wherefore ? but perhaps you would not like them to be told ?"

A faint tinge of colour was visible on the cheek ; then it deepened and spread, and still the gaze continued ; till Helen, unable to bear it, turned away with tears gathering in her eyes.

"You are brooding over the past—sorrowing for it—*meine liebe*."

"I don't sorrow, I have nothing to sorrow for," exclaimed Helen, quickly.

"Nay, then I am ignorant. Have we not often and often told each other of the beautiful past ?"

"It was not beautiful," said Helen. "When I possessed it I did not care for it ; and I don't think about it now. If the present were different, I should not."

A shadow of annoyance was visible on Madame Reinhard's face. She answered rather satirically, "The present is what we all choose to make it. If we think of earthly things it becomes earthly. Will you choose that ? will you be content to live the life of every day, like the quiet cousin we saw the other night, and her grim cavalier, Mr. Egerton ?"

If Helen had chosen to look at Madame Reinhard, she would have seen a glance which, whilst it seemed to wander all round the room, took in every change in her face ; but her eyes were bent in another direction as she replied, with cold self-restraint, "You are rapid in your conclusions."

"Rapid perhaps, but true : do they not suit ? like twins ? she is no very — what do you call it ? amiable, respectable ; and he is John Bull—yes, very decided John Bull."

"That was not your impression when you exclaimed '*Quel grand homme !*'" said Helen, forcing herself to speak coldly.

"You remember that, do you ? yes, a first impression, and a '*Quel grand homme !*' in the outward man ; but in the

Egerton has the reputation of living up in the clouds,"
 "—in a perverse tone. "There are not many John Bulls
 found there."

"In the clouds? does he attain so high? I should never have thought it," said Madame Reinhard, ironically. "And yet, yes, I suppose in his highest elevation he may reach the clouds; but the blue sky, the pure æther, which allows the free gaze to pierce even to the infinite,—Helen, he never has soared there."

"Very few persons have," said Helen.

"Pardon me, *mon amie*. Has it not been said that we are all poets when we read a poem well? So they who understand, who sympathise with, the noble minds whose dwelling is in the depths of infinity, must themselves be of them."

"It is a flattering creed at any rate," said Helen, with an incredulous smile.

"And a true one; and necessary to be believed," continued Madame Reinhard. "Great minds feel themselves great, or they never would be great. And lesser minds must feel what they are and what may be, or they will never attain to their perfection. Look round the world, or rather listen to me, who have had greater opportunities of observation than you: there are hundreds now wasting themselves in inaction, doomed to ignoble obscurity, who might have shone amongst the bright ones of enduring ages, could they but have realised their own powers."

"Is this a lecture for me?" said Helen. "I am quite willing to hear what my own powers are."

"Nay, not when you speak in that tone. We will talk of something else,—your work pattern—Miladi Augusta's crochet."

"I have vexed you," said Helen, affectionately.

"You never vex me, *meine liebe*; it is the mist: I wait till it is past."

"But it is past,—it shall be," said Helen. "I will hear any thing you have to say, and believe it—if I can," was added in a doubtful tone.

"I wish you only to believe in yourself," continued Madame Reinhard. "I would not have you lower yourself by admiring that which is beneath you. You speak of that Mr. Egerton as though he were great, but he is not. Shall I tell you what he is? I read it in the first moment that he talked with me. He is of those who feel, though they may not say, that women have no right to independence of mind."

"No! no!" exclaimed Helen, impatiently. Then checking herself, with the instinct of concealing her own feelings, she added, coldly, "Yet, in one respect, I can imagine that you are right. Mr. Egerton would never endure his wife to hold opinions different from his own."

"And so he would be a tyrant. Ah! Helen, Helen, there are souls which unite as one—which are one, but it is the union of freedom, not of subjection. Your Mr. Egerton is a man of forms, and creeds, and rules: the woman who would be happy as his wife must be content to cut and narrow her own mind to fit his. And there may be such an one." Madame Reinhard paused.

And Helen said, in a voice which never faltered, "My cousin Susan, for instance."

"Perhaps so; I know but little, yet I can sometimes see. She has been brought up (that is what you English call it, is it not?)—brought up, taken by the hand, trained, led. She would close her eyes and follow blindfold, and think she saw. Ah! *meine liebe!* how many there are like her!"

"It may be a pity there are not many more," said Helen, in a constrained voice.

"You think so," replied Madame Reinhard. "Well, you may be right. Of course, if there are Mr. Egertons, there must be Miss Grahams to suit them. But"—she seized Helen's hand, and forced her to look towards her—"let them be what they will to each other, *mein Kind*, I would kneel in thankfulness that you will never consent to be a slave."

Helen made no reply.

Madame Reinhard bent forward and kissed her forehead, and whispered, "Freedom, Helen, freedom! the dearest gift which God can bestow."

Helen's answer was bitter:—"I ask, as I have asked you often before,—where am I to find it? at home?"

"And I answer, as I have answered often before,—in a home of your own."

"I have such a choice!" replied Helen, almost angrily. "Captain Mordaunt, perhaps, would be your recommendation, by way of securing an intellectual companion."

"Ah! Monsieur le Capitaine! There are many worse persons in this naughty world than Monsieur le Capitaine."

"Certainly, I should run no risk of being rid of him either by hanging or transportation," said Helen.

"And he would be good—he would not interfere; he go his way, you go yours,—that would be his motto. I could do very well with Monsieur le Capitaine."

"But you don't mean—you can't,—you would not for the world have married him!" exclaimed Helen.

"He never asked me," was Madame Reinhard's reply.

"But love, congeniality!" exclaimed Helen. "I don't understand you,—I can't in the least comprehend!"

"How should you, *mon amie*? we talk of different things. You look for that which is to be found once, twice, possibly three times, in the history of a hundred years. I grant you to be very happy, very blessed, if you *do* find it; but if you *don't*—and Madame Reinhard shrugged her shoulders,—“what can you do but do without it?”

“And live and die an old maid,” said Helen, with an accent of quiet despair.

“*Meine liebe*, pity forbid! why do you speak of it? No: union of heart, sympathy of soul, may perhaps be found in a husband, though I look round the world, and see very few who have found it, and those always content with less far than you or I would ask. But it can never be that we are shut out from it, though it may not be met with in him. Give me but freedom of action, and I will seek till I meet with it somewhere. Is it not my own case, Helen?” and Madame Reinhard’s face assumed an expression of sadness. “My home!—what is it to me? but my friends!—do I not live in them—live by them? are they not my happiness? There is no sorrow for me, *meine liebe*, whilst you and I can thus meet and be one.”

Helen fondly pressed the hand that was extended to her, but answered somewhat ironically: “And you think Captain Mor-daunt would interfere with us less than mamma?”

“I am sure of it. But I don’t speak of him, *le pauvre homme*. I would not mean any one in particular. Though he would be kind, good-humoured, and he would have means,—he would place the world at your feet.” Helen shrank from the suggestion. Madame Reinhard added, laughingly, “You think that nothing, *mon amie*; but remember money is freedom’s key, and freedom gives us the power of entrance into the spiritual world.”

“I can’t bear it, I must not hear of it!” exclaimed Helen: she rose up suddenly, and passed her hand across her brow, longing, so it seemed, to clear away some weight which pressed upon it. “Gretchen,” and she turned almost fiercely to her friend, “you tempt me.”

“Tempt you, *meine liebe*! no,” replied Madame Reinhard, in a sweet indifferent tone, as though the subject had scarcely rested for a moment in her mind. “Friends cannot tempt one another in these matters, they can but tell of their own experience. I said but what came into my head, brought there by the sight of Miladi Augusta’s face when she met me in the passage. She will not let us long be together, *mein Kind*.”

“Was she alone?” asked Helen, quickly.

"No, there was Monsieur le Capitaine, waiting, despairing to see you, I suppose."

"Not to see me! he is quite aware that I have nothing to say to him," exclaimed Helen.

Madame Reinhard made no direct reply; she only said: "Miladi Augusta looked thunder: I could almost have supposed she knew my wish. I would carry you off, *mon amie*."

"For a drive? I am engaged to go out with mamma."

"But you drive with her every day, and I would take you where you would like to go."

"And you really thought mamma would say yes?" asked Helen.

"I thought I would beg. Miladi Augusta cannot be so very hard, when she has you all day."

"Try," said Helen, bitterly.

"She cannot make you such a slave. Only a drive!"

"Try," repeated Helen.

To her surprise, Madame Reinhard rose from her seat, and said playfully: "I go, and I return conqueror;" and she left the room.

Helen sat in the same position, dreaming sadly: a weight was upon her, a sense of entanglement oppressed her, but she did not feel that she had sufficient energy to shake it off. She was sure that Madame Reinhard had some meaning in her proposal, but she could not trouble herself to inquire what it might be. After a few moments the door opened, and Madame Reinhard appeared again, accompanied by Lady Augusta and Captain Mordaunt. The expression of her face was peculiar,—the mouth was grave, the eyes laughed. She left it to Lady Augusta to speak.

"Helen, Madame Reinhard tells me that you have a headache, and that a drive in her open carriage will be pleasanter than going out with me in a close one."

Helen was about to deny the headache, but Madame Reinhard interrupted her, just as she was beginning to answer. "We will have no excuses, *mon amie*. You are very pale, we think so, all; the drive will be very good, and Monsieur le Capitaine, he also goes for a ride in the park at this hour, and that will be our pleasant escort."

"Then you had better go at once," continued Lady Augusta: "I wish you to be at home in good time. We shall see you at dinner," she added, addressing Captain Mordaunt.

The unmeaning face, half-hidden by whiskers and a moustache, was brightened by a smile, as Captain Mordaunt expressed him-

self proud to accept the invitation ; and Helen, not being able to object to the arrangement without positive incivility, went to prepare for her drive.

By what means Madame Reinhard had contrived to gain that one victory, she did not choose to confess to Helen ; but it was followed by several others, all of the same kind. One day it might be a visit to a picture gallery, another day to a panorama, or an exhibition of curiosities ; the object seemed to be of little consequence to Lady Augusta, as long as Madame Reinhard and Helen were not closeted together, but allowed Captain Mordaunt to attend upon them. Yet she never mentioned his name to Helen in private, neither did Madame Reinhard. His coming or going appeared to be a matter of equal indifference to both, whilst Helen treated him with a coldness which she believed was a sufficient indication of her sentiments to prevent his being deceived. Only now and then Madame Reinhard, by some seemingly accidental observation, drew Helen's attention to the fact, that she was more free with Captain Mordaunt than without him. He was undoubtedly very good-natured, and had not mind enough to interfere with the mind of others ; and Helen and her friend were able to carry on in his presence conversation which would have been *tabooed* by Lady Augusta as dangerously liberal. Being certain that she did not care for him, and that he was aware of the fact, Helen by degrees was becoming accustomed to him. The "cousinship" and the long acquaintance were an excuse for a certain amount of convenient familiarity, cleverly fostered by Madame Reinhard, who took every opportunity of making him useful.

Helen was very blind to what was going on. Her thoughts were often preoccupied, and the very knowledge that Lady Augusta wished her to encourage Captain Mordaunt, made it appear impossible that Madame Reinhard, even if she were capable of manœuvring, could have the same object in view.

But, for once, the clever, liberal, sophistical Madame Reinhard, and the stern, prejudiced, but equally worldly-minded Lady Augusta Clare, were agreed.

Madame Reinhard's position in the society to which she had been admitted, was a doubtful one. She had entered it, as it were, by stealth, introduced by Miss Manners, and a few other would-be literary people, who were fascinated by her quickness of intellect, and amused by the freedom and originality of her foreign manners and habits of thought. But she stood by herself ; her husband's tastes were different from her own ; his friends

were regarded with suspicion ; and he had neither rank nor fortune sufficient to set the opinion of the world at defiance. Many persons declined an intimacy with Madame Reinhard, because they did not choose to become acquainted with her husband ; others, like Lady Augusta, admitted her to their society for a time, and then were inclined to draw back. She could only be certain of those who were exclusively devoted to the worship of talent, and were content to set aside every prejudice, or even principle, for the sake of its enjoyment. And this did not satisfy her. Professing the most exalted theories of unworldliness and contempt for conventionalisms, Madame Reinhard was, in truth, the slave of admiration and the devotee of fashion. To be first, wherever she might be, was an absolute essential to her happiness. To be excluded from any society was a sufficient motive to induce her to force her way into it at all hazards. Intercourse with literary people sufficed as long as it was but a stepping-stone to something beyond ; but when once she had discovered that there was an inner circle, into which she had not the power of entrance, her vain and restless spirit wearied itself in endeavours to break through the magic barrier.

And Helen might assist her—Helen, with beauty, grace, talent, and fortune,—as the wife of a man who must, before very long, inherit an earldom, would have it in her power, and certainly in her will, to give Madame Reinhard, or any person whom she chose to acknowledge as her friend, admission to the society in which she herself was privileged to move. For Madame Reinhard never distrusted Helen. There is something in truth of character which even the untrue cannot but feel. Helen might be raised to a throne, and Madame Reinhard knew that it would make no difference in her affection. If they were friends now, when Helen was a young girl, kept under subjection in her father's house, still more would they be friends, when Helen should have rank and wealth, and freedom, and be able to share them with whomsoever she would. Her house would be Madame Reinhard's house ; her friends Madame Reinhard's friends ; and her husband—that was but a secondary consideration ; yet much better, surely, was it for Madame Reinhard's views, that he should be a puppet in her hands, that a man of strong, independent character, bent upon subjecting his wife to his will.

Better Captain Mordaunt than Claude Egerton. That was a danger which Madame Reinhard's penetration had discovered at one glance. Past it might be—there was something in Helen's *manner*, reserved though she had been, which made it probable—

but not so past as that its influence was gone. And Madame Reinhard smiled in scorn, as she dwelt upon the obstacles which had arisen in her path, and in her secret heart vowed that Helen Clare should, before another month was over, consent to be the future Countess of Harford.

CHAPTER LIV.

"WELL, Claude, my good fellow! glad to see you!" was the Admiral's greeting, as Claude sat down by the gouty chair, and began to inquire after his health. The Admiral's weather-beaten face was looking pale and deeply wrinkled that morning; his eyes had lost their brightness, and the tone of his voice was hollow, though its accent was cheerful. He did not seem inclined, as usual, to dilate upon his many maladies; rather he turned with an interest, which had somewhat of anxiety mingled with it, to Claude's account of his own doings. "And so you have been down at Helmsley for a day or two, seeing after your people? how did you make your business with the House suit with that?"

"I managed to pair off," was Claude's reply. "There was nothing very important coming on, and I wanted to get away very much," he added, in a lower tone.

"Hard work for you, my boy; late hours! they don't suit, I'm afraid. You mustn't wear yourself out before your time."

"No great matter, dear sir, if I do. There won't be too many tears shed for me."

"Nonsense, Claude!" and the Admiral roused himself to energy. "I won't have any such folly. No tears shed for you! Why, if a man feels that he is worth enough to make him shed tears for himself, there is reason sufficient to prevent his throwing away his life. I shall think you are but a woman, after all, with such nonsense."

"But you must allow," said Claude, "that the consideration will have some influence. One can imagine fathers and mothers, for instance, only wishing for life, because of the loss their death will be to their children."

"Well, then, marry, and be a father yourself, and then you will have something to live for."

Every muscle in Claude's face was rigidly strained, whilst the Admiral's eye was fixed upon him. Very slowly, but with

perfect calmness, he answered: "I have no wish to marry at present."

The Admiral's first movement showed irritation; the next instant he laid his rough hand upon Claude's, and said, "My poor boy!" and tears stood in his failing eyes. After a momentary pause, he added, impatiently, "You shouldn't be in London to come across that girl."

It required a great, great effort to speak, but Claude made it. He said firmly, "I feel that it is best we should meet, sir, and I am very thankful that we have done so. It will be much less painful the second time."

"To you perhaps; as for her, she doesn't care enough to feel more or less pain."

"I cannot flatter myself she does," replied Claude; "and in a certain way that fact makes my task more easy."

"What task? you have done with her? you have had enough of her?" exclaimed the Admiral.

Claude's answer was a faint attempt at a smile.

The Admiral became suddenly grave. "I'll tell you what, Claude, my boy," he said; "there's no cure for all this but marriage — marriage for you and marriage for her; and take my word for it, she'll be the first to set you the example. Even now I know from very good authority, that she's on the high road to it; and when she has thrown herself away upon that jackanape cousin of hers, for the sake of being one day a countess, then I suppose there'll be some chance of your friends seeing you a happy, domestic man."

"Miss Clare is engaged then to Captain Mordaunt?" began Claude, coldly.

"Miss Clare don't talk of Miss Clare to me!" interrupted the Admiral; "Helen is the only name I know her by now; fair and false as her namesake. As to her being engaged or not, I won't venture to say; you know well enough, engagements are not matters of much consequence to her. But any how, she's flirting with him till she is the talk of London. You see, Claude, though I do sit in my gouty chair, with my back to the light, I can tell how the world goes. What's the matter? what are you after?" he added as Claude rose up and stood fronting the fireplace.

Claude turned round directly. "Very likely the report is true, sir. In a worldly point of view it will be a very good connection."

"And you won't fret your life out about it?"

"I wish she may be happy, sir: you will allow me that wish."

"And I wish you may be happy, my dear boy. There, come and sit down by me: don't mind; though you may be a man to others, you are a boy to me—*my* boy, and it's natural enough for me to think as I do. Time goes on, and health and strength go with it, and before long I sha'n't be able to say what I would. God knows, Claude, how fathers love their children. 'Twas His will to shut up that joy from me; yet He has given me a taste of it too. There are few fathers who would do more for their sons than I would for you; and when I think of lying down in my grave, the weight which lies heaviest on my heart is the thought that you may go through life as I have gone through it myself."

Claude looked surprised, but before he could speak the Admiral continued: "I know what you would say. I've been a fortunate man, a prosperous, and honoured man. No one, to the best of my belief, will say an ill word of me after my death, and many have said good words of me during my life. God be thanked for both. But, Claude I haven't been a happy man. There's been a want. Look!" and he drew forth a small locket attached to a hair chain;—"would you think now that an old fellow, verging towards eighty, would be such a fool? that he would care still for that which is now only a remembrance of one who is an angel in Paradise; and who didn't love him—Claude, didn't love him," he repeated, with an accent of mournful bitterness. "Ah! we are all more weak than we choose to own; and seventy years of this world's storms haven't sufficed to make me look upon that trinket as what it is; a bit of childish memory; a love-token from a little one who didn't know what love meant. How other men manage I can't say, it's been a problem many a time; perchance, they don't feel as I felt; but one thing I have learnt, Claude, from my own experience, and it's the legacy of advice I'd fain give to you. Don't cherish your sorrow: when God breaks our idols in pieces, it isn't for us to put the broken bits together again. I did it. For years I nursed my grief, and wouldn't part from it, and when I would fain have rid myself of it, it was too late. I had grown suspicious, and felt myself disagreeable, and thought that no woman could ever be brought to care for me, and so I never could bring myself to ask her if she would try; and then I became what I am now; an old bachelor, a weariness, and a trouble."

Claude interrupted him: "Never, sir, never; think of Mrs. Graham, of her children; think of me. Is there any thing a son would do for a father which I would not do for you?"

The old man laid his hand upon Claude's head: "God bless you, my boy, for being a blessing to me. Yes, he has been very merciful; but it is written,—many and many a time have the words come to me almost as a reproach,—'It is not good for man to be alone.' And it is true, Claude: women are not alone like men, when they have reached old age without being married. Their hearts are softer, they form more ties; they have more loving ways. All their lives through, for the most part, they have lived in families, and so the families cling to them, and become theirs. But men are very solitary, Claude; for the greater part of their life society shuts them in as by walls: they have no choice; their friends must be men; and one man may have a great regard for another, they may be very dear friends, but there's seldom any thing softening, there's not enough tenderness in the love; and a man wants that even for his good. The nature is hard, and the world makes it harder, and if there's no woman's influence to melt it, ten to one but he lives for himself, and his selfish needs, and so the good that is in him never puts itself forth. I should have been a better man, Claude, if I had married: married, that is, well and wisely."

"Yes, if one could marry well and wisely," exclaimed Claude, hastily.

"To be sure; that's the point. Better go down to your grave lonely, than with a trouble which will eat into your vitals; and there's none will do that sooner than a senseless wife. But the fault is, Claude, in thinking that because you can't have the first thing you wish for, you won't do very well with the second."

"The loss of the first may destroy all inclination for the second," said Claude.

"A burnt child dreads the fire, eh? But you don't mean to tell me that there aren't fifty,—a hundred women, better worth having in the world than that butterfly girl, Helen Clare?"

"I have no doubt of it, sir; not the least, as far as the taste of other men is concerned, or even according to my own judgment."

"But you don't choose to seek them out," said the Admiral, in a disappointed tone.

"Once deceived, deceived for ever," said Claude, sternly.

A gleam of quick intelligence brightened the Admiral's eyes. "Ah! my boy! I understand. That's the harm. It's what we all do to each other, more or less. No one of us can fall from a pinnacle without shaking those who stand on the pinnacles round us. But perchance, Claude, there may be some placed on pinnacles who had no right to be there; and the fault then may be *with those who put them there.*"

"Very likely, sir, very likely," said Claude, in a tone of impatience, which showed how distasteful the subject was to him. But the Admiral would not let him escape.

"You must bear with me, my dear boy; you must let me say my say. There mayn't be so many opportunities left; and I have it at heart, Claude. It's a yearning I have to see you married."

"Indeed!" said Claude, incredulously.

"Yes, you mayn't think it; but if it had been that you had married Helen Clare, I believe I should have been better pleased than to see you as you are. You aren't made for the life."

"I shall become used to it, no doubt," said Claude.

"Use! It's nature, not use, that makes a man fit to be an old bachelor. There are men made for it, with large hearts but cold temperaments; who love widely, but not deeply; who have their work put before them when they enter life, and who can throw themselves into it, and make it their object. We must all marry something, Claude, or we couldn't live: and some marry principles, and some duties, and some fame, and not a few marry themselves. But it's not in you, by nature, to do either; and if you don't find a wife to your taste, and that before long, the want will canker and eat out all the soft parts of your nature."

"That has not been your case, sir," said Claude.

"Perhaps not entirely. But yours would be worse than mine. We are not alike. You are shut up, I open to everybody, and so everybody opens to me. If you don't take care, Claude, you'll begin by acting coldness, and you'll end by feeling it. That's a danger which young people don't think of; but it's a true one."

Claude was silent and thoughtful: then, as with a sudden recollection of duty, he turned to the Admiral, and said, "You are right, sir, I know. If I can't talk about it, I feel it."

"Act, man, act! I wouldn't give a farthing for feeling without action."

Claude smiled faintly.

The Admiral leaned back in his chair, looking very tired. He sighed; and Claude stood up to go, and yet lingered.

"Shall I ask Mrs. Graham to come to you, sir?" he said.

"She's out," was the Admiral's short reply. "Pour out my medicine, Claude; it's time I should take it."

"Is Miss Graham at home?" inquired Claude, as he put the glass into the Admiral's hand.

The glass was rested upon the table, and the old man's eye sparkled. "You'll find her in the drawing-room, she had been reading to me before you came; the other girls went with their mother?"

"I shall only disturb her, I am afraid," said Claude, coldly.

The Admiral drank off his nauseous draught, and answered quickly, "Not a bit, man. Faugh ! where are the biscuits ? one would think it was ink. Not a bit likely to disturb her, if you've any thing to say."

"Only a question to ask," said Claude, doubtfully.

"She'll answer it: she's always ready. Ring the bell for Barnes ; he must rub my foot."

Barnes came. "Miss Graham in the drawing-room, Barnes?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Right ; I told you so." The Admiral addressed Claude. "She'll come here, if you like it best."

"Oh, no, no ! thank you ! I would not on any account give her the trouble. I merely wanted to ask for the address of a German lady she knows slightly."

"She'll give it you. She is sure to do it. Better go and ask her." And Claude assented, though rather as if he were speaking in a dream. And the Admiral, in spite of his weariness, smiled, as he leaned back in his chair and muttered to himself, "It will do, after all."

CHAPTER LV.

"AFFAIRS seem making progress, my dear friend," said Miss Manners, as she entered Lady Augusta's boudoir ; having just seen Helen set off for her ride in the park with her father and, as a necessary attendant, Captain Mordaunt.

Lady Augusta continued to work at her carpet with an air of severe industry. "I leave all these things, Julia, my love. Helen will take her own way. I don't think of them."

"But your heart must be deeply interested in them," continued Miss Manners. "It is impossible to watch the course of a devoted attachment without being so."

"My heart, I am thankful to say, is not deeply interested in any worldly events, Julia," replied Lady Augusta. "Look at this lily, my love. Do you think the shades are exact ? I have been examining them for the last ten minutes minutely, and can't yet make up my mind. It would be sadly disappointing to find they are wrong ; and I have no time left to alter ; the work must be finished by the eighteenth, or it won't be ready for the consecration."

Miss Manners brought her near-sighted eyes close to the delicate work, looked at it in every direction, and decided that she could not tell. She thought it possible there was a difference, but she was not sure; she hoped not, but then she was afraid; in fact, she was no judge.

Lady Augusta rang the bell. "Excuse me, Julia, but I must have the point determined, every thing depends on it." And seating herself at her writing desk, she wrote a note to be taken with the work to the Berlin warehouse, where the experienced sorter and arranger of wools was to decide the question. Then she turned to Miss Manners with a relieved countenance.

"You will forgive me, my love; you don't enter into these things;" and a sigh followed the words. "But you were speaking of Helen; did you meet her?"

"Looking lovely," replied Miss Manners; "and with spirits so brilliant, so exuberant; certainly there is nothing like the first freshness of youthful animation."

"No," replied Lady Augusta, solemnly; "it is, indeed, a great snare. I find Helen becoming more and more worldly, Julia. She refuses to go with me to the consecration next week, and I shall be obliged to have recourse, as usual, to her father's authority. I should have thought that, after the example I have set, the advice I have given, her eyes would have been opened, but she is wilfully blind."

"The sympathies of married life will probably do much for her," replied Miss Manners; "I have seen many girls change in a wonderful way, when they have found a heart to respond to their own. Lady Louisa Stuart and I have been discoursing upon this subject for nearly an hour this morning. Of course you know her happiness?"

"Louisa Stuart! happiness!" exclaimed Lady Augusta, quite forgetting in excitement her measured solemnity of manner: "you don't mean to say, Julia, that she is going to be married; why, she is nearly fifty."

"She has found a heart to beat in unison with her own," replied Miss Manners. "True,—it has known less of the world's troubles by twenty years; but what is time when feelings are young? Lady Louisa was sweetly confidential with me on the occasion, and talked much of you and of dear Helen, regretting that she had formerly thrown away a chance of happiness, and wishing that she could share her joy."

Lady Augusta's foot patted the floor, as in a very gruff tone she inquired who the man was.

"He is foreign, my love,—Polish,—a Polish count,—an exile,—most intellectual,—beautifully refined,—sensitive,—so Lady Louisa tells me,—to the most extreme degree. I believe she met him at a *soirée* given by Madame Reinhard."

Lady Augusta nearly started from her seat. "Madame Reinhard! that woman is at the bottom of half the mischief in England. It is an absurdity, Julia. A Polish exile! Louisa Stuart throw herself away upon a refugee! It is monstrous; not to be believed."

"Nay, my dear friend; quite true," replied Miss Manners, drawing herself up with dignity; "and, however you may think fit to condemn Madame Reinhard, you must acknowledge that her society is sought by the most enlarged and cultivated minds in London."

"I care not a whit for their cultivation," exclaimed Lady Augusta. "You frighten me, Julia; you have lost all common sense. This German woman has bewitched you. Louisa! my cousin! my first cousin! so very intimate as we have been! She will be the laughing-stock of London. I can't imagine, Julia, why you don't see the excessive impropriety of the whole thing."

"Lady Louisa judges for herself, my dear," said Miss Manners.

"And Helen will some day, I suppose, judge for herself," continued Lady Augusta, "adopting as she does Madame Reinhard's tone; we shall have her following the example, and uniting herself to a Polish infant in long clothes. But it must be ended; I won't bear it. Helen shall not keep me any longer in such torturing suspense."

"I don't understand, my dear," began Miss Manners; "it is difficult to understand the connection of ideas."

"Of course not, of course not," exclaimed Lady Augusta. "Forgive me, my love. I am chafed, fretted." She took out her watch. "Four o'clock! I have shopping to do; but I shall leave it. I shall go into the park, then to church. I require soothing. These worldly anxieties are too much for me."

The bell was rung again. "Order the carriage directly. If Captain Mordaunt calls, tell him we expect him at dinner. And John"—as the servant was about to leave the room, he was recalled,—"when my parcel is brought back from the Berlin warehouse, let me have it immediately, without delay. I must ease my mind at least upon that point," murmured Lady Augusta to herself, as she stood before the window in a moody reverie.

An observation made in a very reproachful tone disturbed her: "Really, Augusta, you perplex me very much; these sudden storms of feeling are what I am not prepared for."

Lady Augusta turned round slowly; her excitement was quite gone. "My dear Julia," she said, "it is impossible that you should be; we live in different atmospheres; we breathe a different air. When you have known the responsibility of a mother's charge you will comprehend, not till then. But don't be alarmed. I shall not allow myself to be overcome; the emotion is but temporary. I doubt not that I shall, ere long, see my dear Helen's best interests provided for, and be at liberty to seek repose. Till then, my love, think of me, and pray for me." Lady Augusta pressed her friend's hand tenderly, and left her, saying, "You will come to us, this evening, Julia;" an invitation which was declined with all due protestations of lasting affection and sympathy.

CHAPTER LVI.

LADY AUGUSTA changed her intention before she reached the park. The order was given to drive to Cavendish Square; she wished to call on Mrs. Graham and Admiral Clare—the last wish that was likely to arise in Lady Augusta's mind, except from some feeling of necessity.

"Is your master able to see me, Barnes?" was her softly-uttered inquiry, as Barnes made his appearance in the hall.

"I will inquire, my lady." Barnes knew his duty too well to admit Lady Augusta without preparation. Mrs. Graham was out. Miss Graham at home. Lady Augusta was shown into the drawing-room; Susan sat there alone; work was in her hand, but her fingers were not moving. A man's glove lay on the table; her eyes were fixed on it so intensely, and her thoughts were so deeply engaged, that she did not perceive Lady Augusta's entrance.

A kiss on her forehead was almost the first intimation she received of the presence of her visitor. "My love, it is an age since we met. How are you? You are looking charmingly well."

Susan happened to be very pale that afternoon, but Lady Augusta knew her speech by heart, and would not be put out by facts.

"How is Helen?" asked Susan. It was the question which from childhood she had invariably asked after one of Lady Augusta's salutations. It seemed the shortest way of putting an end to them.

"Helen is pretty well, my love; she is gone out riding with

her father and Captain Mordaunt. She rides nearly every day now. I wish you had a horse and could ride with her; it would be such a delight."

"Helen said something about it one day," replied Susan; "and the Admiral was very kind, and told her he would hire a horse for me, if I liked; but I am rather afraid of riding horses I don't know, in London; and there are so many other things to be done."

"Yes; so much to see for those who come to London but seldom! Your dear mamma, I am afraid, is not at home?"

"She went out with Isabella and Anna," replied Susan. "They were to go to the Polytechnic, I think; Anna had never seen it."

"And they left you alone. Too bad that seems, but you have such resources. I often wish I could give Helen your habits of industry."

"She does not need them in the same way," replied Susan. "She has so many engagements."

"Ah! my dear, so you may think; but engagements abroad don't make up for want of interest at home, and Helen is sadly wanting in interest; she has been so ever since —, that was a very unfortunate business of poor Claude's."

Susan could scarcely conceal her surprise. This was the first time that Lady Augusta had ever approached the subject.

"But I hope she may be getting over it," continued Lady Augusta. "At her age it is not possible that the morbid feelings in which she indulged at first should last; and so I trust, my love, we may yet see her happy. Her cousin, Captain Mordaunt, is devotedly attached to her."

"And is Helen going to marry him?" inquired Susan, hastily.

"My dear, you ask me a question of which I know as little as yourself. Helen is a mystery to me. She shuts herself up from me. She has but one friend now, a German lady; I think you have seen her, — Madame Reinhard."

"Yes, I know Helen is very fond of her," said Susan.

"Quite spell-bound, my love. I have no power to withstand it. And it pains me,—you can well imagine,—after the very careful education which I gave to my dear child, that she should fix her affections upon a stranger, a foreigner; it has been a great grief to me, Susan."

"Helen once told me that Madame Reinhard was such a relief in the solitude of the country, that she could not help being fond of her," replied Susan.

Lady Augusta's countenance was clouded. "Helen had no right to say that, my dear. If I have kept her from ordinary

country society, it has been in order to elevate and refine her taste, not to lower it. But let that be as it may, Helen is fast getting beyond my influence: but I have great confidence in you, Susan."

Susan was silent; she did not comprehend.

"Yes," continued Lady Augusta; "I feel that it is in your power to do much for my poor, wilful child; and it has been a subject of great regret that from circumstances she has been thrown so little with you. Since dear Claude's alienation, Helen has had no true friend. Ah! he would have guided her so well, Susan."

Lady Augusta's tone had a reality in it which for once quite deceived Susan, and she answered with hearty sympathy, that they had all felt very sorry for him and for every one.

"I feel assured of it, my love. I can at all times depend upon your entering into my feelings, and I think now I may look to you for aid."

Susan's countenance spoke her surprise very plainly.

"I see, my love, that you don't understand me," continued Lady Augusta; "but I am sure you will allow me to be confidential with you. This friendship of Helen's troubles me. I don't know how to put a stop to it. Sir Henry is so indulgent, he won't interfere. A step-mother's position is a very difficult one, Susan; it is always looked upon with suspicion, and Helen is naturally inclined to rebel against authority. What I want is a friend who will enter into my views, who will be a friend to Helen also: am I mistaken, dear child, in thinking that I may look to you?"

Susan murmured something about her mother, it was the only way which presented itself of escaping what her instinct told her was likely to be a very disagreeable proposition.

"Ah! but, my love, that won't quite do. It is a friend of her own age that Helen requires—an influence which she will not suspect. Surely, Susan, you would help?"

"I can't see what I am to do," was Susan's blunt reply.

"Tact, my dear; that is the great desideratum, and I am sure you possess it."

"I am afraid not," said Susan. "I speak my mind too plainly."

"That simple sincerity! Helen will value it above all things. It will be a counterpoise to Madame Reinhard's influence. You could not come and stay with us, Susan?"

"Thank you, no; impossible!" exclaimed Susan, who could not help remembering that she had been in London for several

weeks, and had received from Lady Augusta only the bare civilities of distant acquaintance, until now there was a motive for a show of affection.

"Why impossible, my love? Surely your dear mother will spare you, and Anna and Isabella are so good and useful."

"The Admiral won't like it," said Susan.

"Poor, dear, old man! I suppose not; but he must be humoured; we must come round him. I can't accept a refusal."

Susan's eye wandered round the room to escape Lady Augusta's gaze, which was so determined that it almost compelled her to say yes.

In her confusion she moved a book near her, and Claude's glove fell to the ground; she stooped to pick it up. Lady Augusta glanced at it inquiringly, as it was laid upon the table, but she made no remark, only repeated and insisted upon her request.

Susan felt a little more inclined to yield. It seemed impossible that she could do harm, and she might do good; and she felt very uneasy about Helen. It did not appear right to allow her dislike to Lady Augusta to stand in the way. In a more cordial tone she replied, that she would talk to her mother, and send Lady Augusta a written answer; she felt much obliged for the invitation; with a few more civil speeches of the same kind, which were interrupted by a perfect hailstorm of thanks from Lady Augusta, who immediately began to enter more fully into what she called her views.

Susan heard them with an uncomfortable feeling. She was requested to be as much as possible with Helen and Madame Reinhard, to take care that Helen formed no new acquaintances amongst Madame Reinhard's friends; in fact, to counteract indirectly the German influence which, for some reason that Lady Augusta evidently did not choose to confess, was still allowed the opportunity of working upon Helen's mind. Susan detested any thing approaching to management and plan. She was again upon the point of declining the invitation at once, but Lady Augusta did not give her the opportunity. Of course, she said, Susan could not decide without consulting her mother; but a refusal was not to be heard of. It would be the greatest possible comfort to know that a third person, and such a person, was present when Madame Reinhard and Helen were together.

"But must they be together?" asked Susan, feeling more and more, that if she was helping Lady Augusta out of a difficulty, she might be helping herself into one.

"My love, there are reasons,—you would scarcely believe it,

but Helen has few persons to take an interest in her. We have many friends, but they all have their engagements—the London world is sadly selfish. And you know, Helen and I are very different, our tastes lie quite in an opposite direction. It would be impossible for me to follow her to all the frivolities on which her heart is set. And Madame Reinhard makes herself useful, so that I don't venture to interfere. Helen, indeed, seems to take pleasure in forming engagements which interfere with my one hour of rest in church; very different from you, my love."

"We generally go to the morning service," said Susan; "that interferes with no one."

"Ah! if health would permit! But late hours, late breakfasts: what is to be done? But I must not stay and talk, my dear, though I could willingly. Can I see the old Admiral for a few minutes?"

Lady Augusta was shown into the library. The Admiral tried to look his best. He detested condolences, but they formed a necessary part of Lady Augusta's formulas. He contrived, however, to cut them short.

"Your ladyship gives yourself too much trouble in asking so many questions. I am as well as pleases God; not quite so well as pleases myself. I should be back again in the country if it weren't for Frances Graham, or rather her children."

"You are so good to them, my dear sir."

"Not at all good. They put themselves out of their way to come to London when I wanted to see my doctor, and it's only fair that I should put myself out of mine when they want to see all there is to be seen."

"But it must be a great enjoyment to them. Dear Susan, however, seems less energetic than the rest; I found her sitting thoughtfully alone in the drawing-room."

"Susan stayed at home because she had a cold. She hasn't been alone very long; Claude Egerton was there talking to her not half an hour ago." The Admiral felt something like a naughty child in saying this: he hoped to tease Lady Augusta, and was quite aware that he should not have done it if Mrs. Graham had been present.

But Lady Augusta was imperturbable. She did not even betray that her curiosity was satisfied in having discovered the owner of the glove.

"Poor Claude! He is a frequent visitor here, I suppose," she

replied. "I was glad to hear a friend say, the other day, that his spirits were rallying."

The Admiral laughed bitterly. "Your ladyship thinks with Shakespeare, 'Men have died, and worms have eaten them; but not for love.' I believe you are right. Claude Egerton is too sensible a man for that. I suppose we are to congratulate Miss Helen upon being prospective Countess of Harford."

"My dear Admiral, that is looking very far forward. No; I don't allow my mind to dwell upon such remote probabilities—possibilities perhaps I ought to call them: I wish to dwell only in the present. Life is so very uncertain; and one may never live to see what now seems close at hand. I shall feel for poor Claude if ever the time should come."

"Feel for him!" thundered the Admiral. "He doesn't want any one to feel for him. I beg your ladyship's pardon, but Claude Egerton can never be in want of a wife when he chooses to ask for one."

"I quite understand, my dear Admiral, quite sympathise with you: yes, indeed, dear Claude is a very noble fellow! I only feel sorry that he should have fixed his affections so unfortunately, and been so *exigant*. He pressed the thing—no woman can bear that; but then Claude was never accustomed to women."

"Not to such women!" murmured the Admiral to himself. He said aloud, rather sulkily, "I suppose Sir Henry is too busy to come and see an old uncle?"

"He is very busy, at the House every night; but he would certainly find time for you, if he thought you had the slightest feeling upon the matter."

"I don't say I have," muttered the Admiral; then vexed with himself, he added with childlike candour, "I shouldn't care to see him if he came only for duty."

"But he will be delighted, he will be rejoiced to talk over public matters with you, and he will tell you about dear Claude's success. We naturally take a deep interest in his career. I have heard many most eminent opinions about him; all agree he is likely to be one of the most distinguished men of his day."

"Humbug!" was the word which came most readily to the Admiral's lips; yet he could not help inquiring a little more minutely into the eminent opinions; and Lady Augusta repeated, and enlarged upon them, and detailed a few anecdotes, and touched upon public topics so as to give the Admiral just the opportunity of contradicting her, which he enjoyed. He really thought at last that he had so put her down, that he could afford

to be generous and civil, and then Lady Augusta seized her moment, and brought forward the subject which had been upon her mind from the beginning—Susan's visit.

The Admiral grumbled,— would give no opinion,— thought Susan would be much better at home,— did not know what her mother would say,— but he was by no means decidedly antagonistic; and Lady Augusta, having learnt from long experience to “let well alone,” took care not to thank him too much, but hurried to her carriage, and drove to church, to exhibit herself in her favourite character of unworldliness, and to congratulate herself that her friends would no longer find fault with her for allowing Helen to associate exclusively with Madame Reinhard.

CHAPTER LVII.

“SUSAN, are you dressed for dinner already?” said Helen, coming into her cousin's room at Grosvenor Place.

“I had something to read which I wished particularly to finish,” said Susan; “so I dressed first, that I might not be hurried.”

“And you are not in a humour to talk then? Yet I have seen nothing of you yet.”

“Is Madame Reinhard gone?” asked Susan.

“Yes, for the present”—and Helen sighed, and sat down in the easy chair, determined not to be sent away.

“You have had a long conversation with her,” said Susan; “you began before Lady Augusta and I went to church.”

Helen looked up quickly. “So odd that is in you, Susan, to go to church with mamma! and you are not in the least a humbug—Madame Reinhard says so.”

“I am much obliged to her for her good opinion,” replied Susan, rather haughtily.

“You don't like Madame Reinhard; you have a prejudice against her, but you will come round. She does you more justice than you do her.”

“Because she allows that I am not a humbug?” asked Susan, ironically.

“That does not mean, I hope, that you think her one!” exclaimed Helen, almost angrily.

“Oh no, I would not for the world say that, yet I should think it possible she deceives herself.”

"She has a great deal to say for her opinions," replied Helen.

"So have most persons who form them according to their wishes."

"She has a great deal to say for her opinions," again repeated Helen, speaking to herself; then looking up suddenly at Susan, she said: "If you were a slave, Susan, should you think it any sin to run away?"

"I don't suppose I should; at any rate, it would be a sore temptation."

"A sore temptation!" repeated Helen; "one would risk life for freedom, and why not happiness?" she added, in an under tone. It seemed as though she were mocking her own words.

Susan looked at her sadly. "Helen," she said, "Madame Reinhard, whatever pleasure she may give you, fails in making you thoroughly happy."

"In that respect she is like every one else," replied Helen; "when have I ever been happy?"

"In your childhood, when we played together by the lake, and made huts in the wood, and said we would love each other all our lives."

Helen shook her head. "No, Susan, no; you are mistaken, I was not happy then. I lived in my own imaginations, but I was not deceived by them; I knew them to be unreal, and all my life I have been searching for reality, and have never found it."

"And do you think that Madame Reinhard will give it you?" asked Susan.

"At least she longs for it, as I do," replied Helen; "we can search for it together. Ah! Susan, you can little comprehend the charm there is in that thought; you who have enjoyed sympathy always."

"Sympathy in my better feelings," said Susan, "not in my fancies. My mother guided me, Helen—that has been my blessing."

"And I have had no guide," exclaimed Helen. "Mamma thinks she is my guide, and asserts a power over me; but how can I submit my reason to forms,—shams? Truth! give me but truth. If it be not mine now, let me be free to seek it. Surely it is one's first duty," she added, her large, speaking eyes bent upon Susan with a look of keen, eager, restless earnestness.

A sense of fear,—of some unknown evil, stole over Susan's heart. She drew near to Helen, and knelt beside her, and said gently: "Helen you have something on your mind which makes you speak in this way."

"Only a question, a doubt," and Helen laughed, a sharp, harsh laugh. "If I were Louisa Stuart, I would make Shakspeare my mouthpiece:—

'To be, or not to be, that is the question:—
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind, to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune;
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And, by opposing, end them?'

But you don't understand, we won't talk any more; it is all nonsense—nothing. Tell me—you haven't told me yet—how did you make your mother and the old Admiral consent to your coming here?"

"By telling them I should like it," replied Susan: "but Helen, I am not going to let you treat me in this strange fashion."

Helen interrupted her. "Telling them you liked it! When I say I like it, I have nay: would you bear that?"

"Helen, dearest, you won't be lectured by me, or I could lecture."

"I will be—yes, I will;" and Helen's manner changed suddenly, and she became grave and gentle. "I love you, Susan; you would be my better angel—you would give me rest if you could."

"I would try to show you where rest is to be found," said Susan. "You seek it in yourself, and it is not there."

"No, indeed, indeed; but, Susan, let me tell you; you have known my life—every thing; *you* will not blame me. Rest, and truth, and goodness, they are all phantoms to me; they have come near me," and she slightly shuddered, "and I have tried to grasp them, but they have eluded me. Perhaps it has been my own fault—perhaps I had no power to retain them,—but they are gone now, and they will never return to me again; and so I would try to do without them. If I cannot have the happiness of which I once dreamed, yet I would have freedom,—room for my mind to expand—scope for my intellect. If I am weak myself, so much the more need that I should find strength in the strength of others. But all this is denied me. I am hampered on every side, checked in every longing for what is great and noble; soon I shall be isolated from all I love or care for. When we return to Ivors my life will be a dreary waste."

Susan interrupted her. "Helen, no one has a right to say so who lives, as you do, surrounded by persons who are dependent upon you, and are ready to be influenced by you."

"Influence!" exclaimed Helen. "Oh, Susan! how little you know! Where is the influence of one who has no power of sym-

pathy? You look shocked; but it is true. Education, people say, does every thing: if so, I may thank mine for making me what I am. I was never taught to think of others except to criticise. Ivors was my world, and I knew and cared for nothing beyond it. You know yourself that, whether the persons who lived near us were happy or unhappy,—whether they had tastes and interests like mine, or feelings, or affections, it was of no consequence to me. I was taught to look upon them as something foreign to myself. Occasionally I may have heard anecdotes which seemed to bring them within my powers of comprehension; but my first impulse was to judge their actions by my own standard—the standard of Ivors,—and to condemn them if they differed from it. I have learnt now to laugh at that standard, Susan, but I have not learnt to understand my fellow-creatures. No; care for others, whether poor or rich, will never make Ivors any thing to me but a home of dreary monotony.”

“But if it is the scene of your duties,” began Susan.

Helen laughed faintly. “Susan, dear, are you still so innocent? Do you really believe it possible to govern one’s affections by cold duty? You must give up that creed, at least where I am concerned?”

“But you don’t mean to live without sympathy!” exclaimed Susan.

“Not at all, so that it shall be of my own choosing. Give me but the power to choose my friends,—the few whom I may love, and who will love me in return, and I will ask for nothing more; the world may then go its own way.”

“I don’t understand that happiness, Helen,” said Susan, gravely.

“It seems to me to be only a form of selfishness.”

“I won’t call it happiness,” replied Helen, quickly, “only the best substitute for it. But I must have it—yes—at all hazards,” she added, in a tone of assumed firmness.

“And what would be your notion of real happiness, then?” asked Susan.

Helen hid her face in her hands, and made no reply.

The dressing-bell rang, and she started up. Her countenance was very pale, and when Susan touched her fingers they were of an icy coldness.

“I must go,” she said, trying to draw away the hands which Susan held.

A strong impulse gave Susan strength to say, “Helen, you are deluding yourself, and suffering Madame Reinhard to delude you.”

"Freedom!" exclaimed Helen,—a wild glance shot from her eyes.

"Yes, freedom," repeated Susan; "none can be happy without it; but—let me say it, Helen, it is no cant—there is but one true freedom, not outward, but inward,—freedom from ourselves."

Helen smiled scornfully.

"Freedom from the power of our own will," continued Susan—"freedom which shall bring every thought into captivity to a higher law."

Helen shook her head; her lip quivered. "Too late for that!" she exclaimed; "I must be what I have been made—what I am doomed to be;" and almost before Susan had time to speak again she was gone.

CHAPTER LVIII.

ADMIRAL CLARE was ill. The physician said, not seriously so, and talked of suppressed gout, and hoped that, in a few days, a regular attack would make every thing right. Mrs. Graham nursed him unweariedly, and kept up her own spirits and the spirits of every one about her. She would not allow Susan to be sent for, and had always a cheerful plan for the day for Isabella and Anna, and a hopeful word for Claude Egerton. The word danger was never mentioned; but there was one symptom—it might have been thought superstition to notice it, yet every one did—the old man's irritable and eager spirit had sunk already to rest. He obeyed his doctor and trusted to his servants; he scarcely uttered an impatient word; but something of a child's confidence had stolen over him,—a belief that all would be well, whatever it might be. It seemed as though he had deliberately resigned his will into the Hands of God.

He had kept his bed about four days, growing, perhaps, a little weaker, but with no other sign of change. Mrs. Graham was sitting in his room, and he was repeating a psalm to himself. He did this constantly, not conscious, apparently, that he could be heard. That simple-hearted unreserve which is quite unaware of observation had always been one of his chief characteristics. When the psalm was ended he lay quiet for a little time; and then Mrs. Graham thought that he was asking for some water, and went up to his bedside.

He put out his hand to her, and smiled, and said, he was not wanting any thing, he had only been thinking aloud. "Very happy thoughts, Frances, but I don't trouble about them. It will all be as God wills."

"Are they thoughts about which I can help in any way, dear sir?"

"No, Frances; no. It isn't for us mortals to meddle in these matters. Only it seems to me now as if the way was opened, and so I was thanking God for it." He paused a moment, and added: "Would there be any harm, Frances, in having my little Susan back? I won't ask it if she is better where she is."

"She shall come directly, dear sir, if you have the slightest wish to see her. She wanted to return, as you know, directly she heard you were ill, but Lady Augusta wrote such an urgent note."

"She's right,—yes; the child may do more good there than here. Frances, there's a reproach on my conscience. Helen Clare may be a giddy-pated girl, but I should have tried to make her better, instead of calling her so."

"I am afraid you could not have done much," began Mrs. Graham.

"I could have prayed for her," exclaimed the old man, with sudden energy. "If I had said a prayer for every cross word I have spoken about her, perhaps by this time she might have been on her way to Heaven. God forgive me, for Jesus Christ's sake," and he joined his hands, and closed his eyes, repeating the words again to himself.

"I trust Helen is on that way now," said Mrs. Graham, reverently. "Her faults may be great, but I cannot but think there is a right purpose underneath."

The Admiral was silent for a moment. "Claude Egerton has seen my little Susan more latterly, Frances; he has talked to me about her. He would not say to you what he does to me."

Mrs. Graham's manner was a little nervous. She replied: "I am sure Claude esteems Susan highly, but I can't say I have ever seen any thing which would make me believe he has any warmer feeling."

"So you always say," replied the Admiral, in a disappointed tone. "But it's as God wills; quite as He wills, remember. I don't want to wish; I ask Him every day not to let me wish. But I love her, He knows why; and so, sometimes, as I lie here, I tell Him what I think would be happy for her, and it is letting out my heart. He understands it all, and ordered every thing for me, and for you, and for all, long before the child was thought

of; and, Frances, I can say to Him what there's no one here to know any thing about."

"Yes," said Mrs. Graham, earnestly; "one does feel the blessedness of being understood by God more and more every day."

"And it can't be wrong to think," began the Admiral—he waited, considered, then repeated the words, and added, "I pray Him to teach me if it is."

"Wrong! what, dear sir?" asked Mrs. Graham.

His answer was abrupt, as he looked at Mrs. Graham fixedly. "You aren't like your mother, Frances. I have often tried to think you were, but you are not."

"I am like my father," was the quiet reply.

A strange, sad smile passed over the old man's face. "A cause why I ought not to care for you, so people would say. But that was never my fashion. Let my own heart break, so that those I love are happy. But it didn't break, it only shrivelled, dried up for a time; and now it seems fresh again. Perhaps, Frances, God's dew has fallen upon it, and so restored it."

A choking sensation in Mrs. Graham's throat interrupted the answer, and the Admiral continued: "Age makes us young again. You will feel that if you ever come to my time of life. I have lived continually in my youth of late years; and now that God has placed me on my death-bed, and made me helpless, He seems to carry me back to be a child. My little Susan's face is very sweet to me, Frances. I shall like to see her by my side again; only don't let her come if she's needed elsewhere, if she can do good. I can dream," he added, eagerly, and a flash of light sparkled in his dim eye: "it isn't any living features that are needed to help me to do that. God gives me back the memory when my eyes are closed, and he sends no sorrow with it now. They 'neither marry nor are given in marriage' where she is, Frances, and I shall love her there, and tell her that I do, and perhaps—I wouldn't think of it, if it were seen not to be God's will,—but perhaps it may be pleasant to her, even in her great joy, to be told that I cared for the child for her sake, and left her on earth happy. Was that Claude's step?"

Claude came into the room. The Admiral's ear had caught the accustomed sound, though Mrs. Graham had not heard it.

"Are you better to-day, dear sir? I don't think you look so."

"Yes, Claude, better, always better. When one is nearer to port, one must be so."

Claude glanced uneasily at Mrs. Graham.

"The Admiral has been talking rather more than usual," she

said, "and has tired himself. He certainly was better this morning."

"And not at all worse now," said the Admiral, cheerfully. "Sit down, my boy, and tell me what you have been doing. Any thing very important last night at the House? Frances hasn't read the papers to me to-day."

Claude sat down, and described with minuteness the course of the debates of the previous night, the Admiral listening and occasionally making a remark, which showed that his intellect was in its full vigour. He even debated some important topics with Claude, differing from him, and giving arguments with clear, though perhaps rather prejudiced reasonings. He was much more tolerant, however, of a contrary opinion than he had ever been in health, and frequently interrupted his own train of thought, to remind Claude that "he didn't mean to be positive; an old man of eighty, shut up in a sick room, had no right to be; he begged Claude to forgive him if he was." The conversation interested him so that no personal remarks were made for some time. But Mrs. Graham remarked Claude's face, and saw that his inmost thoughts were troubled, and she could catch also, in the intonation of his voice, something which betokened a wandering attention. After a time the Admiral appeared tired, and said he should like to be quiet, but he would not hear of Claude's going away. He declared that he had not said half he wished to say. "Couldn't Claude take a book, and wait for a quarter of an hour?" and Claude, though his time was precious, consented, and went with Mrs. Graham into the dressing-room, the Admiral promising to ring if he wanted them.

"I don't think he is so well to-day," said Claude, as Mrs. Graham took up her work. He could not help feeling annoyed that she was calm, when he saw cause for anxiety, and his tone showed it.

"I don't think he is," was the reply; "but the change has been within the last half hour. He always is worse when he has been exciting himself with conversation, and yet if he likes to talk, it seems hard to try him."

"And you would not think of sending for Miss Graham," asked Claude. He had almost said Susan, the name came to him so familiarly.

"I had not thought of it, at least till this last conversation. Do you see any particular cause?"

"Not exactly." He spoke as if his attention was wandering, and added, with abruptness, "Does Miss Graham tell you much of *Madame Reinhard*?"

"Not very much ; she knows I have been so occupied with the Admiral. But what makes you ask ?"

"Nothing, nothing ;" but the nothing certainly meant something.

Mrs. Graham looked pained. "That will not do for an old friend, Claude."

He caught her hand eagerly, "Thank you, thank you for that name ; to hear it from a woman's voice is so sweet !"

"Then you must act towards me like Claude," continued Mrs. Graham. "There is something troubling you ; I must know it."

He sat down, and averted his face, as he murmured, "I am horribly weak ; it would be impossible to tell any one but you."

"There is no amount of weakness which I cannot sympathise with," said Mrs. Graham. "Remember, I have had much longer experience in it than you."

He smiled doubtfully, and drew a letter from his pocket, but stopped as he was upon the point of giving it.

"You know the Baroness d'Olban ?"

"By name."

"And reputation ?"

"Yes ; but one is unwilling to believe all that is said."

"Believe all, and more than all," said Claude, emphatically, "and you will not be far from the truth. She is Madame Reinhard's friend, therefore ——" he paused.

"Helen's," said Mrs. Graham, gently.

He rose from his seat impetuously. "No, never, never ; at least not yet," he added, checking himself, sadly. "But I want to explain. This letter was shown me by an acquaintance, I can scarcely call him a friend, of my own. It is addressed by Madame Reinhard to the Baroness d'Olban. No secret was made of it ; it was spoken of as a good joke. It concerns——" he stopped ; his voice was husky—"the subject to which it alludes was first made public by Madame Reinhard. There is no reason, perhaps, you will say, why I should trouble myself about what two such women may choose to say. But read it, read it—tell me what you would feel if one of your own daughters was discussed in that way. Oh, Helen ! Helen !" and Claude threw himself into a chair, and groaned aloud.

Mrs. Graham read the letter. It was, as Claude had said, addressed by Madame Reinhard to the Baroness d'Olban, and written in a style of witty, but vulgar, confidential intimacy. It alluded to previous conversations, and facts which were evidently well known, and these of a most painful and humiliating kind as

regarded Helen. It seemed that the chance of her marriage with Captain Mordaunt had become a common topic of amusing speculation, owing to Madame Reinhard's incautiousness, and Captain Mordaunt's absence of all delicacy of feeling. Captain Mordaunt appeared to have made Madame Reinhard his confidante, whilst she communicated all that passed to the Baroness d'Olban. Helen's name was bandied about at clubs, and the letter alluded to bets which had been laid as to the chances of her marriage, and especially to one which had been accepted by Captain Mordaunt, depending upon Helen's consenting, before another week had gone by, to be his wife.

Mrs. Graham laid the letter upon the table with a very grave air.

Claude looked up ; but waited for her to speak.

"I would ask one question," she said ; "is it authentic ?"

"Could I make myself miserable for a doubt ?" he exclaimed. "I heard the reports and the bets myself. I inquired how they arose ; the thing was quite public. This letter, as I told you, was given to me without scruple by a person to whom it had been shown as a capital joke."

"It is beneath Madame Reinhard," said Mrs. Graham ; "it is so low."

"She knows well how to please the person whom she addresses. Wit is all the Baroness cares for."

"To plan deliberately,—to show such an entire absence of delicacy of mind—such an utter disregard for Helen's feelings!" said Mrs. Graham ; "it seems impossible."

"She is false !" exclaimed Claude. "The very first evening that I saw her she told me that her acquaintance with the Baroness d'Olban was slight ; I soon found that they were together constantly. When I discovered this, I resolved to watch ; and I have mixed with their set, and learnt—Oh, Mrs. Graham ! death would be better than to see Helen what they are. She has deceived and disappointed me ; she is but the wreck of what she once was ; but she cannot be to me merely what other women are. No ; let her marry whom she will,"—his lips quivered, but he recovered himself—"only let it be with her eyes open."

"Captain Mordaunt is the most to blame," began Mrs. Graham. Claude interrupted her. "A weak, vain, miserable wretch, what could he do against an artful woman of the world ?—the odds are not equal. When Madame Reinhard made up her mind to get him into her toils, she had but to flatter him, and the work was done.

"Intolerable!" exclaimed Mrs. Graham. "Lady Augusta must interfere."

"And ruin every thing," said Claude. "Madame Reinhard has at least done me this favour: she has gossiped so freely about Lady Augusta's domestic affairs, that I am as well acquainted with them as if I had been living in her house. Lady Augusta upholds Captain Mordant: even if she knew these facts, she might do so still; if not, Helen is in that state of mind that the very slightest opposition from her step-mother would drive her to assert her own independence: she would marry instantly."

"After seeing this letter? Impossible!"

"Ah! you don't know." A heavy sigh escaped him.

"You wish me to interfere," said Mrs. Graham.

"I don't know what I wish. The letter was given me only the moment before I came here; I have had no time to think." He put his hand to his forehead.

"Helen has sometimes listened to me," said Mrs. Graham; "but there is an immense difficulty in interfering without Lady Augusta's knowledge: I must go either to her or to Sir Henry."

"And do nothing!" exclaimed Claude. "Forgive me, but Sir Henry would instantly put the affair into his wife's hands. There is no one but Helen that can rule Helen," he added, bitterly.

Mrs. Graham thought for a moment. "We must take the right steps," she said, "and leave consequences. Lady Augusta must know best what should be done."

Claude made a gesture of impatience. "Lady Augusta knows the hours for daily service in every church in London, and she can tell you where to find the best singing and the finest preachers; she can give you, too, as much ecclesiastical gossip as you may have a fancy to hear, and more, perhaps, than you may like; but what other knowledge she possesses which may be of use to her daughter, I confess I have yet to learn."

"It is very unfortunate," said Mrs. Graham. "But Lady Augusta's mania, whatever it might be, was always absorbing."

"This is a worse mania than any other," replied Claude. "It disgusts really earnest people, and throws discredit upon things in themselves worthy of all reverence. Of all playthings, religion is the most dangerous: touch it for amusement, and its wound is deadly; and Lady Augusta will feel this by-and-by. She has made her daughter indifferent; before long she will make her a sceptic."

Mrs. Graham started.

"With Madame Reinhard and the Baroness d'Olban for her friends," exclaimed Claude, "how can she escape? Dear Mrs. Graham, you know as well as I do that it is not by church services, nor devotional books, nor religious conversation, that a mind like Helen's can be influenced. The sight of an earnest, practical, humble life would, through God's mercy, have made her religious; but she has never had it. Why should she love religion, or even believe in it? It is to her merely another form of vanity and excitement."

"Yet Helen ought to see through Madame Reinhard," said Mrs. Graham. "She has sufficient truth in herself to detect falsehood."

"But not sufficient knowledge of the world," replied Claude, quickly. "She is too guileless to be suspicious."

"And she was taught prejudice from her infancy," continued Mrs. Graham, thoughtfully. "That may be one cause of her being so easily misled. I have remarked in other cases, where girls have been brought up on a system of exclusiveness, that their feelings become intensified, whilst their power of judgment is narrowed; and so any person admitted to their intimacy is likely to become an idol, merely because there is no one else with whom a comparison can be made."

"Lady Augusta would say, I suppose, that she did give Helen opportunities of forming a judgment," said Claude, ironically. "She brought her to London, and allowed her to rush through a London season."

"Three months' residence in London will not undo the work of nine months in the country, and the training of years previous," said Mrs. Graham. "Exclusiveness may be altered by it in form, but it certainly won't be destroyed, for it is the habit of the mind. A girl educated like Helen does not know what it is to have sympathies in common with her fellow-creatures. She likes or dislikes, simply as a matter of taste, and always in reference to her own fancy. No; I suspect we may close our great gates, and flatter ourselves that evil in a carriage-and-four can't enter, and then find that self-conceit has glided in unperceived by the wicket. People seem to me to forget that education is as necessary to enable us to form our judgment of persons as of books. However, we are doing no good in discussing all this now. The question is what is to be done?"

"Leave it all," said Claude, despondingly. "I am foolish to trouble myself about the matter."

"You forget that Helen is my sister's child," said Mrs. Graham.

"Yes, I do forget it," he exclaimed. "When I think of her surrounded by the cant of religion and philosophy, about to rush upon her ruin, I forget that she is, or could be, any thing but the pupil of Lady Augusta Clare."

"We must not be severe," said Mrs. Graham.

He looked at her in surprise. "Am I severe? God knows ——" he paused: his manner quite changed, as he added, "I would wish to be guided by you."

Mrs. Graham considered. Then she said, rather hesitatingly, "Your opinion of Madame Reinhard would go far to second the impression made by this letter."

"Mine! Mrs. Graham, you know Helen well. Have you never heard from her the sharp laugh, which rings as though it were struck from metal? That laugh would be the answer if she were told my opinion of Madame Reinhard. No; there is one person—only one—your daughter, Susan. I have thought that she might find an opportunity, only I should be so sorry—so grieved—to trouble her mind with such subjects."

"I have never kept from Susan any subjects, by knowing which she could be useful to others," said Mrs. Graham. "I believed the necessity would neutralise the harm. Besides, I have always observed that the mischief of the knowledge of evil consists, not in the facts, but in the mode in which they are communicated. Whatever I have, at any time, thought it desirable that my children should know, I have, therefore, told them myself in as simple, and straightforward, and unmysterious a manner as I possibly could. Susan would hear any thing I might tell her, whether about this matter or any other of the same kind, without receiving any great moral shock. She knows that there is a great deal of evil in the world, and she will not become false, or sceptical, or careless in her conduct because cases of the kind are brought before her. Still it requires a great deal of consideration before one can determine that it is right she should be mixed up with this business."

A loud tingling of the Admiral's bell at that moment interrupted the conversation. Mrs. Graham hastened to answer it. Claude left the letter and the envelope on the table, and would have hurried after her, but she motioned to him to remain. He went to the window, and stood there thinking. His countenance expressed feelings of mingled scorn and suffering, and again and again he put his hand to his brow, as though the weight of sorrowful care were pressing him down beyond his usual powers of

endurance. A knock at the door was twice repeated before he heard it. Isabella entered, and surprised at seeing him, was going away again; but Mrs. Graham's voice from the inner room summoned Claude in an eager, frightened tone. He rushed into the next room. Isabella lingered in the dressing-room, afraid to advance further.

The Admiral's faintness had partially returned; his face was deathlike, but consciousness was left. He feebly kept Claude's hand in his, whilst Mrs. Graham tried every means to restore him. It was a work of time and difficulty; one moment he would rally, but the next he sank back again. Isabella stole into the room, hoping to be useful, and was sent to call Barnes, and write a note to the Admiral's physician; and when this was done she came back to station herself in the dressing-room, and was told that "the Admiral was better. Mr. Egerton and Barnes had managed to raise him. There was no confusion of the mind,—he knew them all; but he seemed distressed because Susan was not there, and a message was to be sent to her." Isabella offered to write it, and went back to the dressing-room for the purpose.

Mrs. Graham and Claude stood by the Admiral's bed. The old man feebly and uneasily turned his head from side to side, looking for some one.

"Susan will be here very soon, dear sir," said Mrs. Graham, gently.

But he scarcely smiled. His eye rested on Claude.

"She will be here almost directly, sir," repeated Claude. "The note will be finished and sent in a few minutes."

"She won't come—she won't understand," murmured the Admiral.

"Oh, yes! Susan understands more quickly than any one," replied Mrs. Graham, "especially where those she loves are concerned."

"I am sure she won't delay a moment," added Claude, earnestly.

The Admiral's dim eye became quite keen in its expression. He glanced at Claude, and said, "I'm not going to die."

An irrepressible smile crossed Claude's face as he answered, "We hope you are going to be a great deal better, dear sir."

"Not so much chance of that," murmured the Admiral. "Frances"—Mrs. Graham bent down to him—"he'd much better go than write."

Claude heard the words. "Yes, I will go, sir, willingly, directly;" yet he hesitated.

Mrs. Graham read what was passing in his mind. "Dr.

Markham will be here presently," she said, "and you may be wanted."

"Wanted; what for?" said the Admiral, quickly.

"There may be something to be done,—Claude may make himself useful," replied Mrs. Graham.

The Admiral looked at Claude very earnestly. "I wish you to go," he said, in a feeble voice; and then he was heard muttering to himself, as though making an apology: "it will save her a fright,—he'll explain."

Claude moved away; Mrs. Graham followed him. "We must not fret him," she said; "you had better go. If you ask for Susan, that will be all that is necessary. And will you tell Isabella that the note is not wanted."

She pressed Claude's hand affectionately. He stood lingering longing to say more, till the Admiral's voice was heard at the highest pitch which his strength allowed: "Is Claude gone? why doesn't he go?"

And Claude then went into the dressing-room to give his message to Isabella. She was sitting at her desk, writing; some note-paper and two or three envelopes were lying by her side. "This is mine, I think," said Claude, observing the direction of that which he had shown to Mrs. Graham. Part of a letter was still in it; the remainder lay upon the table, rather hidden by the desk, and he did not remark it; neither did Isabella till Claude was gone, and she had finished writing, and moved away her desk; and then she took it up, and looked at it; and, finding it was something which did not belong to her, imagined it must have been addressed to her mother, and put it into the pocket of her blotting book, to be kept safely.

CHAPTER LIX.

HELEN CLARE sat alone in the little morning-room adjoining the drawing-room. Her cheek was pale, her eyelids were heavy and swollen, her lips pressed together, as though she had forgotten to smile; and before her lay two letters, one worn, and creased, and blotted, on which many tears might have fallen; the other fresh and new, written in large characters, upon glazed note paper, with the stamped crest of nobility at the top of the page. Helen's thoughts did not take the form of soliloquy. People soliloquise on

the stage for the benefit of the audience, but very rarely in real life for their own. And Helen was not in a state to carry on any regular train of thought. She was, indeed, upon the verge of the great decision, by which, once again, she was to bind herself for life; and at every sound of the distant opening of a door, she listened and trembled, in the expectation that the interview which, at Madame Reinhard's instigation, she had consented to grant, and which she felt must determine her fate, was close at hand. But she had not reached this point by thought, but rather, as is the case with thousands, when bent upon their own destruction, by not thinking. She was about to commit a moral suicide, and she walked deliberately forward, closing her eyes to consequences, and stopping her ears to every voice, except that which whispered, in the charmed accents of Madame Reinhard, that marriage, if it were not happiness, would at least be freedom.

But we are ingenious self-tormentors. And now, resolved upon the act which was to place a barrier between herself and the days gone by, insurmountable even in the eyes of the world, Helen could not resist one lingering glance at the past, a glance strangely mingled, of curiosity and repentance. How had she felt towards Claude? She had almost forgotten. Time, new scenes, new associations, the excitement of the present, had so blended conflicting feelings, that she could not recall them. She took up his letter,—the few lines—the last which she ever received from him,—in which, without one word of reproach, he had expressed his acquiescence in the sentence that parted them.

“Helen,” it said, “you have decided wisely. I have neither the right nor the wish to complain. We are not suited, and I could never have made you happy. But let me say in self-defence,—for I shall never again have the opportunity,—that the last thought in my mind was that of subjecting you to *my* will. My dream was of a law which should rule us both,—the law of mutual love, and of willing dedication of ourselves to God. May we both be saved from the unutterable wretchedness of seeking for happiness without it!

“Do not think I shall forget you; it is impossible: your name will still be treasured amongst my dearest, though saddest memories; and when I hear that you are blest, I shall feel that I am blest myself.

“CLAUDE EGERTON.”

Oh! the pang of shame, of self-reproach, which struck Helen's heart, as she read these lines, and then glanced at the note upon the table!

Claude and Captain Mordaunt! she would not, could not, ought not to think of them together; and she rose up, and paced the room, and, with a strong resolution, dashed away the rising tear, and crushed, with unsparing hand, the purer, holier longings, which those few words had caused to spring up in her heart.

Footsteps upon the stairs! Helen turned pale; she caught up the letter, and sat down. Men's voices in the lobby! she had almost rushed through the door, opening into the drawing-room, and escaped.

Yet why? her will was her own. Now, now, at the last moment, she might draw back; she had given no open encouragement, beyond receiving a note of silly compliment; she had only said to Madame Reinhard, that if Captain Mordaunt called she would see him. Coward! why should she be afraid to listen to him, to hear all that he would say, and trust herself, if she saw fit, to reject him? She took up her work, and the needle fell from her trembling hand; she stooped to find it, and at that moment the door opened.

When she looked up, Claude Egerton was standing before her.

Cold, stern, self-possessed, not a line of his countenance betraying the slightest emotion, confronting her without embarrassment; —and Helen shrank from his eye like a guilty thing, and her voice was scarcely audible, as, in reply to his question, whether he might be allowed to see Miss Graham, she replied, "I believe so. Perhaps she may be gone out; I will go and see."

He stopped her. "The servant will let me know. I would not give you the trouble. I came to take her away. Admiral Clare is very ill."

A thundering knock at the street door! Helen could not rise from her seat; if she had attempted it, she must have fallen to the ground. She made no reply to Claude's information.

He could not help seeing how ill she looked, and he remarked it.

She said it was the noise; she was startled by it. Her eye turned to the door, and Claude's glance followed the same direction.

A little page entered with a note. "The gentleman had left it, and would call again in a few minutes."

Helen tore it open without an apology. "Visitors are to be shown into the drawing-room," she said, hurriedly; and the page left the room.

"I am in your way," observed Claude.

Helen's smile was ghastly. "My cousin will be here directly,"

she said. "She went out with Mamma. I don't know where she is."

Again she took up her work, and both were silent.

Claude said something more about Admiral Clare. Helen seemed scarcely to hear him. He talked for some minutes, and mentioned Madame Reinhard's name, and asked if Helen saw much of her, and watched the reply.

Helen said, "She must be gone out." She thought Claude was speaking of Susan.

Another knock. Claude took up his hat, and remarked that there must be a visitor. He would wait in Sir Henry's study, if he might be allowed.

"It does not signify; there is no hurry," said Helen, nervously. She seemed afraid now that he would leave her.

But he insisted upon going; she could not stop him; but she murmured something about Susan, and went to the door, and looked out into the lobby.

Claude followed her closely. Captain Mordaunt was coming up the stairs. Claude saw the burning colour rise to Helen's cheeks, and with a feeling that was almost maddening, he rushed past Captain Mordaunt without speaking, and entered Sir Henry's study. There, even before the door closed, he heard the free confidential tone in which Helen was addressed; her confused, hesitating reply, whilst, as if certain of the footing on which he stood, Captain Mordaunt followed her into the little study.

No, it was too late; and Claude knelt down, and prayed for her.

CHAPTER LX.

LADY AUGUSTA CLARE's carriage was seen standing before a small house, in a dull street, in the neighbourhood of Belgrave. A page, duly buttoned and tutored, was at the open door.

"Lady Louisa Stuart's, my love; you won't mind calling with me, I hope," said Lady Augusta; and Susan acquiesced, and was ushered up the narrow stairs. Ormolu, porcelain, Bohemian glass, papier mâché, gilding, beads, Berlin work, books in blue and crimson—such a profusion of prettinesses; and Lady Louisa, dressed in the youthful style of three-and-twenty, flounces and ribands, and with the simplest, slightest apology for a cap, and seated at an inlaid table, writing with a gold pen upon superfine

paper! Nothing could be more touching, or prospectively bride-like. "My dear Lady Augusta," she exclaimed, "come at last! I have been waiting, 'chiding the lagging hours,' till I saw you. And Miss Graham, too! I thought it had been fair Helen."

"Helen is engaged at home. I supposed you would think me unkind, if I didn't call," said Lady Augusta, bluntly.

She seated herself; her countenance and attitude severe.

Lady Louisa, with an air of uncomfortable misgiving, addressed herself to Susan.

"I have not seen Helen for an age, but I trust that time is working wonders for her."

"Helen is quite well," said Lady Augusta, quickly.

"Ah! she has been taught by Proteus,

'Cease to lament for that thou canst not help!'

I should have called to see her long before this, but I have been so occupied."

Lady Louisa's eyes were modestly cast upon the ground.

"Do you mean to be married in London, Louisa?" said Lady Augusta.

"You ask a difficult question; there is much to be thought of. Indeed, I have had no time for thought."

"So I imagined," said Lady Augusta: "one of my reasons for calling to-day was to say, that Sir Henry disapproves of Helen's accepting your offer of having her as one of the bridesmaids."

Lady Louisa coloured. "Indeed! I should have thought, that considering former friendship and relationship—yet I suppose it may be natural: there must be painful reminiscences; things might have been so different."

"You had better get taller bridesmaids, Louisa," continued Lady Augusta; "they will look much better."

For a moment Lady Louisa was discomposed; but she quickly recovered herself. "There has been a difficulty about bridesmaids," she said: "the Count has so few relations in England, and all my own particular friends are married, and so indeed are most of the young ladies of Helen's age. This is her third season, I believe." Lady Augusta would not vouchsafe a reply, and Lady Louisa addressed Susan. "You rather despise London seasons, I believe, Miss Graham?"

"I have never had the opportunity, because I have never had the experience of them," said Susan.

"Aptly answered. No doubt you devote yourself to the sciences?"

"I devote myself to whatever may happen to come," replied Susan, laughing. "Every thing is new to me."

"And you are staying with the Admiral: and of course you see Petruchio? how fares he?"

"Mr. Egerton was very well when we last met," replied Susan: "but I have not seen him for some days."

"Very well, is he! of course meaning very happy?" and Lady Louisa gave such a peculiar glance at Susan, that she blushed, without knowing why. "Well, it is but what Rosalind says: 'The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person, videlicet, in a love cause.'"

"You speak from experience, I suppose, Louisa?" said Lady Augusta, sharply.

"Nay, how can it be my own?" said Lady Louisa, with a satirical smile. "I leave it to Helen to inflict the test. But, seriously, I am comforted to hear that Petruchio bears up against his trial. He will scarcely, I suppose, venture upon another Kate?" And again Lady Louisa determinately looked at Susan.

"You talked of the Count's relations," said Lady Augusta, abruptly; "who are they?"

"Who? A wide question; one must be learned in the blood royal of Poland to answer it," said Lady Louisa.

"I never heard that Poland had a blood royal," observed Lady Augusta, drily. "I suppose their names all end in *ski*; and I should advise you, Louisa, to take care that their honours don't do the same, and melt into thin air."

Lady Louisa only smiled, with a pity that was more nearly akin to contempt than to love.

Susan felt that the conversation was becoming uncomfortable, and, to divert it, asked if Lady Louisa had seen Miss Manners lately.

"This morning only; she is just gone: and that reminds me—I was so sorry to hear from her such a bad account of the Admiral. She had been calling in Cavendish Square, and was not admitted: seeing you here, however, I trust the report is exaggerated."

Susan looked surprised, but scarcely uneasy. "It must have been a mistake," she said. "I should certainly have been told if he was worse. Last evening the account was much better."

"Indeed! I dare say it was." Lady Louisa evidently thought

the matter not of the slightest consequence, and turned to Lady Augusta.

"I am afraid I shall scarcely have the pleasure of seeing Sir Henry, and yourself, and fair Helen, on the twentieth of next month. Rumour whispers that you are intending to leave London about that time."

"We talk of it," said Lady Augusta, stiffly. "But the twentieth! you are carrying on matters quickly."

"Yes; and overwhelmed with business in consequence. I may with truth say, 'I have to-day despatched sixteen businesses a month's length a-piece.' But the Count has no mercy. Miss Graham——"

Susan started at the sound of her own name. "Ah! your thoughts were elsewhere; forgive me."

"I was thinking of the Admiral," said Susan. "Did you say that Miss Manners had been calling in Cavendish Square to-day?"

"Only just before she came here. Mr. Egerton, she was told, had gone to Grosvenor Place with some message for you."

Susan stood up; her face flushed and very anxious. "If I had only known," she began, whilst looking at Lady Augusta and expecting her at once to say that they would go: but no response was made, and she left her sentence unfinished, and sat down again.

"Where do you mean to go for your wedding tour, Louisa?" asked Lady Augusta.

"It is uncertain. So many are busy with advice upon the subject, that we are constantly changing our minds. Sometimes it is France, sometimes Italy, occasionally Germany. But doubtless we shall have the pleasure of meeting abroad if, as rumour has again whispered, you are projecting a tour on the continent."

Lady Augusta would not reciprocate the wish; and in the pause that followed Susan again hoped that she would move.

Lady Louisa at length observed the expression of her face. "You are anxious, I am afraid," she said. "I have disturbed your peace of mind."

Susan tried to smile, and answered, "A little. But I shall hear every thing from Mr. Egerton."

"You could not have a better messenger," said Lady Louisa; "so entirely considerate."

"You were not used to speak so favourably of Claude," observed Lady Augusta, sharply.

"Was I not? that was because the world spoke so well of him

that there was no need. I may occasionally have laughed at Petruchio,—I have an unhappy knack of laughing at every one,—but I never could do any thing but respect him, and suppose that others would have sense enough to do the same.”

Lady Augusta rose suddenly. “Susan,” she said, “we shall be late for church; are you ready?” Susan put down her veil, wished Lady Louisa good-bye, and walked to the further end of the room. Lady Augusta lingered.

“And you really can give me no hope of seeing you on the twentieth, Augusta?” said Lady Louisa, feeling a little mollified at the last moment, and anxious to have the sanction of such a dignified presence. “There will be little enough to offer in the way of entertainment. My aunt comes to preside and act the lady of the house, and we shall have but few guests, and nothing splendid. With my small establishment it could not be otherwise.”

Lady Augusta looked round to see if Susan was near, and then answered, “This is not the time to talk seriously, yet I may not have another opportunity. Louisa, though you forget appearances, I don’t. What can this unknown Polish youth be to you?”

Lady Louisa cast her eyes to the ground and answered,—

“Thou art an elm, my husband ; I, a vine,
Whose weakness married to thy stronger state,
Makes me with thy strength to communicate.”

Is not that answer enough? Would you not be happy if Helen could say the same?”

“At one-and-twenty, yes,” said Lady Augusta; “and if the man were worth her having.”

Lady Louisa smiled bitterly. “And Helen says at one-and-twenty, no! though the man may be worth ever so much. Take care that she does not say it too often.”

Lady Augusta drew her shawl round her, and allowed Lady Louisa’s hand to drop from her grasp.

Susan followed her down stairs in silence. When they were both seated in the carriage, Lady Augusta threw herself back, and exclaimed, “Intolerable idiot! she is worth no better fate. Now, Susan, for church.”

But Susan had a request to make:—She could not go to church; Mr. Egerton was waiting for her, and she wished to see him.

Lady Augusta’s eye rested upon her with a sudden gleam of suspicion. “Mr. Egerton! why should he be sent? They can’t wish you to go back with him?”

“I don’t know,—I have not thought about it,—only I am so

very anxious:" and Susan's feelings, repressed during the interview with Lady Louisa, struggled to gain vent, and tears stood in her eyes.

Lady Augusta spoke again, and more sternly: "This is weakness, Susan; I don't like weakness; I warn you against it. You had much better go with me first; it will strengthen you."

Susan's tears were repressed in an instant. "I am never afraid of not having strength given me when I am doing my duty," she said, "whether it may be in church or out of church. If mamma wishes me to return, I must."

Lady Augusta's face showed great displeasure; she murmured, "Mr. Egerton must be very intimate!" and then, pulling the check-string, gave an order that the carriage should take her to church, and afterwards carry Miss Graham back to Grosvenor Place.

She did not utter another word during the remainder of the drive, and Susan mechanically watched the crowds moving through the streets, whilst thinking of the Admiral's illness, and her mother's message, and in the depth of her heart nursing a vague feeling of mingled happiness, shame, and foreboding,—now, for the first time, assuming a definite form, and based upon those few words, "Mr. Egerton must be very intimate!"

The carriage stopped at Grosvenor Place. Susan woke up as from a troubled dream when the clamorous knock was given. She almost opened the carriage herself to rush into the house; but a conflicting feeling kept her back. She asked for Mr. Egerton, and was shown into Sir Henry's study.

Claude sat there alone; his back was towards the door, and he turned impatiently as she entered. Susan saw his face, and her heart sank. Sallow, dark, agitated! she read in it at once the confirmation of her worst fears.

"He is dying!" she exclaimed: "you are come to tell me of it!" and she burst into tears.

Claude became more calm; he seemed in a moment to throw aside self, and his manner was full of a brother's tenderness. He ventured to take her hand: he spoke gently and soothingly. "The Admiral," he said, "was not so well, and was wishing to see her. There was nothing serious yet: of course, all changes for the worse must cause uneasiness. Perhaps Susan could return at once in Lady Augusta's carriage if it was still waiting?"

Susan had sat down, but she rose directly, her tears gone, composed, reasonable, as she always was. She felt that Claude's eye was upon her; it made her self-conscious: she could not under-

stand what it meant, and lingered thinking he had something else to say.

"Your presence will be a great comfort," he continued; "Mrs. Graham has been wanting you sadly. Shall you be ready directly?"

"Yes, in one instant. I will give directions to Annette, and she will take care of every thing for me, and then I will say good-bye to Helen."

Claude's countenance changed; he tried to speak and failed.

"Ought I not to wait even for that? Have you kept any thing back from me?" exclaimed Susan.

"Nothing, nothing!" He walked towards the window that his face might not be seen, and Susan dared not ask him another question. She went to her room, rang for Annette, and gave her directions, and inquired if Miss Clare was in the drawing-room.

"In the boudoir, I believe, mademoiselle; and I think there is a visitor there." Annette had her own suspicions, but she would not betray them.

"Then ask if she can see me for one moment; tell her I am going home; that Admiral Clare is very ill." Susan followed Annette down the stairs, and waited in the lobby. She heard voices; Captain Mordaunt's was easily recognised; its tones were eager. What Helen replied was inaudible, but she came out looking flushed and confused; she scarcely seemed to understand what Susan said.

"Going, are you, dearest? so suddenly! I am so sorry. But you will come back again? the Admiral will soon be better."

"I am afraid they won't be able to spare me again, dear Helen; and you will be leaving London soon."

"I don't know. Did you leave mamma at church? Is she coming back? Shall you take the carriage? I think I am quite bewildered by these changes." And Helen pressed her hand across her brow.

The footman came up the stairs. "I am desired to say, ma'am, that if you don't go at once, there won't be time to take you to Cavendish Square, and to return for my lady."

"I must go, Helen dearest; one word only, don't be led."

Helen's laugh was sharp and grating; she made no answer.

"Hark; there is Mr. Egerton's voice, he is waiting: dearest, good-bye."

The touch of that icy clammy hand which was laid in hers! Susan never forgot it. She ran down stairs; and Helen stood at the top and watched Claude come out of the study and take Susan

to the carriage, saying kind, gentle words of comfort. A cloud of intense, irrepressible agony passed across her face, and her fingers were laid on the handle of the boudoir door. Yet she lingered. The lock was moved involuntarily, and the slight sound decided her. She entered, and before the interview ended she was engaged to Captain Mordaunt.

CHAPTER LXI.

CLAUDE talked a good deal during that short drive; it seemed that he feared to trust himself with silence. He gave Susan details of the Admiral's illness, anticipated her questions, and seemed to know by instinct every thing which interested her. She became more uneasy as symptoms were disclosed which her mother had kept from her, and the hysterical choking feeling which had before overpowered her returned again; but she controlled it, and talked quietly and with more unreserve than was her wont. She felt relief in being able to say what was in her mind to one who could understand; and Claude, as he listened to her, found repose in the deep, yet unexcited feeling, which she expressed.

"I am so much obliged to you for coming for me," said Susan, as they reached Cavendish Square. She half put out her hand to him, and then drew it back again. But he took it cordially and answered,—

"I have to thank you. It has been a comfort; it is always a great pleasure to do any thing for you. I hope you think that." Susan's colour came and went quickly; she hurried away from him. Claude's eye followed her as she went upstairs.

She was not Helen; but she had given him what Helen never could—rest.

That evening Susan sat beside the Admiral's bed, her hand laid upon the coverlid, and his resting upon it; his fingers every now and then moving as though he would convince himself by touch that she was still there. She was telling him about her visit, talking to him of Helen and Lady Augusta. He listened not perhaps with pleasure, for the old associations aroused something like irritable feelings, yet with interest, and some satisfaction in the confession of his own repentance. It was more unreserved to Susan than it had been to her mother. He said that it

humbled him to think how uncharitable he had been; he had indulged the feeling against his better conscience; people little knew how the hard words, said perhaps without half the hard meaning put upon them, would rise up on a death-bed. Probably he should never see Helen again, but he begged Susan to give his love to her. "I can say that truly now," he added. "When the world's troubles are coming to a close, the world's dislikes die; and she's not likely to stand in your way, my little one; that's a human thought, but it's a great help."

"I don't understand; Helen never did stand in my way," said Susan.

"Not that you saw, my child, you were too innocent; but we mustn't talk about that. Where's Claude. Can't you all come in for prayers before he goes to the House; and then I should feel ready for the night."

"Mr. Egerton is with mamma, I think, and she is writing a note to the Rector, as you wished, to ask if he can arrange about to-morrow for the Holy Communion."

"Ah! yes; all well. I can wait!" The Admiral's head sank back on his pillow. Presently he said, "If it had been God's will, I should have been glad to see you happy, my pretty one; but since it's not, I don't complain. Only if the time comes, you'll think of me."

"I am happy," said Susan; "I should be, that is, if you were better."

"No cause to let that disturb your happiness, child. The 'peace that passeth understanding' is better than earth's joy. But life is before you, Susan, and I pray God to bless it for you."

"In His way," said Susan, earnestly.

"Yes; you are right, you are right—in His way; but that's a hard way sometimes."

"Still if it has His blessing——" began Susan.

"It must be well in the end. You feel that, do you?" He looked at her intently, turning his head to read more in the answer than the words would convey.

"I think I do," said Susan; "but I have had very little trial."

"It will come," he continued, "sooner or later, in some form or other; but bear up bravely, my child. Each day has its own sorrow, but each day has also its own strength; and as we draw nearer the close of our journey, the sorrow decreases and the strength increases. It is a pleasant thing, Susan, to stand at the foot of the great hill of life, and feel that we are mounting to the top; and it is sobering and very solemn to rest there when we've

reached it, and look down upon the path by which we are to descend, with the grave bounding our view, and never from that time to be lost to sight. But the upward journey is slow and toilsome; the downward, rapid and easy. Whatever your burden may be in the upward way, my child, cast it upon God, and He will aid you to bear it; and when the downward path begins, you will, through His Grace, cease to feel its weight. But I don't know why I go off in this strain," he added, checking himself. "I always want to talk of bright things to you, Susan, but somehow the thoughts wander off into sadness. Can't you call Claude now? I'm getting tired."

They came—Claude, Mrs. Graham, Isabella, and Anna—and knelt with Susan around the bed. Claude came nearest to the Admiral that he might hear the prayers, and the old man beckoned to Susan, and made her kneel next. His eye rested upon them with a lingering gaze of indescribable, longing affection, whilst Claude waited to begin; and then, making a sudden effort, he folded his hands and said, "Now I am ready." And Claude read the evening prayers to which he was accustomed. The Admiral followed them, half aloud, till towards the end, when his voice failed. Claude looked up alarmed, but the Admiral motioned to him to go on. At the close he stretched out his hand feebly, and touched Claude, and murmured Susan's name.

"We are both here, dear sir," said Claude; and Susan approached and put her hand within that of the Admiral.

"Both," murmured the old man. He felt for Claude's hand, and joined it with Susan's. "Be kind to her, Claude; be kind."

They were the last words he spoke. Another fainting fit came on, from which he never entirely rallied, and before midnight,—Admiral Clare was dead.

CHAPTER LXII.

SUSAN spent the greater part of the next day lying upon the sofa in the dark, desolate drawing-room; desolate, not because it was changed in its outward appearance, but because the spirit which had filled it was fled. She was ill; the shock had come upon her very suddenly. The love of the aged is a less exciting, but perhaps a prouder possession than the affection of the young; it calls forth all our best feelings; it is nourished by reverence, humility,

and unselfishness. There had been but little romance in Susan's life, so the world would have said; but there is romance in every pure and holy affection, and Susan's daily work had been refined and ennobled by the consciousness that all which she did, though possessing no intrinsic value, was precious in the old man's sight as the living memory of his youth. The feeling was gone now; she had one interest less in life, one person less for whom lovingly to sacrifice her own will, and that is a great loss to the affectionate and the unselfish. But she was not miserable, as she expected to be. She had given way, in momentary physical weakness, to a passionate burst of sorrow, but now she was calm again; more than calm—peaceful and hopeful. Mrs. Graham and Claude were busy. They had arrangements to make, painful, and admitting of no delay. Anna was her mother's right hand, and Isabella was occupied in writing letters. At another time Susan would have been fretted by the thought that others were exerting themselves without her; but the shock upon her nerves had destroyed this longing for activity. She was told that it was her duty to be quiet, and she acquiesced without remonstrance. All that she now needed was to lie in the dark room, and dream over the closing moments of the Admiral's consciousness—dream of them, dwell upon them, with intense love, with bitter regret; yet with an undercurrent of happier feeling, indefinite, unrealised. Was it faith? was it the thought that the labour of life was over, and he whom she loved was at rest?

Alas, for the deceitfulness of the human heart!

Some one entered the drawing-room. Susan started up, but she felt weak and dizzy, and her head sank back again upon the cushion. She was vexed with herself, but she could only lie quite still, and resolve to speak as though nothing was the matter.

Claude drew near the sofa, and Susan made another unavailing attempt to sit up, and then smiled, and said it was no use, she must consent to be good for nothing; but it was very trying.

Claude paused before he replied. Susan could not clearly distinguish his face in the imperfect light; but he sat down wearily.

"Mamma will wear herself out, I am afraid," observed Susan; "it seems hard not to be able to help her."

"But you must not try yet. I hope you won't think of it," he said, quickly. "I came to tell you what we thought of doing, if it would not worry you. You are sure, quite sure you would not rather be left alone?"

Susan heard his voice tremble, and her own heart throbbed so

painfully, that she could scarcely answer intelligibly: "Thank you; you are very kind to remember me."

He interrupted her. "Don't tell me I am kind; all I can do is nothing. If you would only let me be of service to you — now, always. Mrs. Graham talks of going back to Wingfield immediately. You won't regret that, though I may."

"But you will come to the Lodge," said Susan. It was an unfortunate remark, made only because it had suggested itself as something to be said.

Poor Claude's firmness gave way. He rose and walked up and down the room; then came again to the sofa, and said, "I must go to-morrow; the funeral is to be there. I must wait to see the relations; then my connection with the Lodge and Wingfield, and with all that part of the country will be at an end."

It was as though Susan's heart had been touched by ice, such a cold chill passed through her.

"Mrs. Graham has promised to write to me," he continued, more cheerfully; "and I hope she will let Charlie pay me a visit at Helmsley, some day."

"He will be very glad, I am sure," said Susan. Her voice was cold; Claude noticed it.

"I can never express what I feel," he said. "Whenever I try, I fail; but we have had such deep feelings in common, I don't think we can ever meet as strangers, however long our separation may be. I can answer for myself, at least — I shall never forget."

"Neither shall we," said Susan, and the words were spoken timidly, but the tone came from the heart.

"Shall it be a compact?" said Claude, and he offered her his hand. Susan placed hers within it, yet scarcely returned the cordial, affectionate pressure.

"Thank you for allowing me to be your friend," he said.

"You have been so without my permission," she replied.

"Not as I could wish. Promise me you will tell me if in any way I can be of service to you."

"If you will promise the same."

"You might be; yes, I think you might," he exclaimed with an eager impulse; but a change followed instantaneously. "Yet it is too late; forgive me for disturbing you," and with another hasty pressure of the hand, he left her.

Mrs. Graham went into Susan's room late that night to see if she was asleep. She had been sitting up herself talking for some time to Claude. And Susan knew this, for she had heard their voices in the room below hers, and knew when Claude said good

night, and followed his step through the hall, and heard him shut the front door; and still fancied that she was listening to his footsteps beneath her window, but that was only imagination.

Her mother came in very quietly, but Susan spoke and inquired if it was late.

"Not very, my love; but I hoped you would have been asleep."

"I can't sleep, mamma; I think of so many things; I heard the voices downstairs," she added.

"Claude is but just gone. Poor fellow! he is so terribly lonely now, and I don't know what to do for him. I am afraid it will even be worse for him by and by than it is now."

"Mamma, you are tired and worn out; you are thinking of every one but yourself," exclaimed Susan. "And yet you must be the most unhappy."

"I can keep up, my love, for the present, and there is no support like that of thinking for others. I must do that now. Can you tell me, Susan, any thing about Helen and this reported engagement with Captain Mordaunt? Don't if it involves any breach of confidence."

"Helen!" repeated Susan, in a tone of surprise; "I don't know: she never tells me any thing. Mamma, will Mr. Egerton travel with us to-morrow?"

"I think he will go later, though I can't bear his being left alone as he must be; and he distresses himself about Helen."

Mrs. Graham waited for a remark in reply, but it did not come.

She drew a chair to the side of the bed, and as she sat down Susan threw her arms round her and kissed her, and murmured "My own sweet mother!" She had no power to say more; and the touch of her parched lips sent a pang to her mother's heart.

"You had better sleep, my child," said Mrs. Graham; "we will talk of this to-morrow. I only wanted, if I could, to satisfy poor Claude. He is so sure that Helen is engaged."

"Will he care?" asked Susan, and her voice sounded changed and hollow.

"He thinks Captain Mordaunt unworthy of her, and he has proof of it. A gossiping letter from Madame Reinhard to the Baroness d'Olban has fallen into his hands, which corroborates some disagreeable reports he has heard at his Club. Captain Mordaunt has been making so sure of having Helen at any moment, that he has even laid bets upon the subject. If Helen knew this she would be intensely angry, but the difficulty is how to let her know it. If Lady Augusta is told, she will interfere just in the way to exasperate Helen, and induce her to marry

Captain Mordaunt; if Sir Henry is told, he will give the affair into Lady Augusta's management. I don't see what is to be done; and if Helen is really engaged, the affair becomes very complicated and awkward."

"I—I——" Susan struggled for breath; her mother gave her some water, and raised her pillow, and in a trembling voice she said, "Helen was not engaged when I left her yesterday." Turning her head aside she closed her eyes.

"Thank you for that shadow of comfort, at least, my darling," said Mrs. Graham; "I will let Claude know the first thing in the morning."

Susan's lips moved, but no sound came from them, and underneath the coverlid her hands were tightly clenched together with a pressure which at any other moment must have been real suffering.

Once more she felt her mother's kiss upon her forehead, and Mrs. Graham stood by her and looked at her anxiously, but she did not speak again. Sleep seemed to be stealing over her; and at length, as minutes passed on and still she did not move, Mrs. Graham's uneasiness lessened, and she left her.

But sleep came not to Susan. Feverish, restless, a weight on her heart, tumultuous thoughts thronging her brain, a sense of sin on her conscience, where could the weary heart find rest? Claude's anxiety for Helen,—what mattered it to her? Why did the mere sound of their names, when coupled together, strike her as with the sharp thrust of a dagger? Why did the possibility of Helen's being actually engaged to Captain Mordaunt make the blood rush to her heart with a thrill of excitement, only to end in the depression of a wretchedness that seemed about to sink her to the earth? What was it she felt, which she did not dare own even to her mother? Susan groaned in bitterness of heart, and tried to pray, and felt her words checked by the consciousness of some unknown yet permitted evil; and then, in very weariness, said that she would think no more, and strove to sleep and failed. So the hours of darkness passed, whilst the dim light burning in her room gave a new and fearful outline to every well-known object. Occasionally she started at the sudden cry of some reveller in the street, or shuddered as a faint moaning through the crevices of the old walls recalled the solemn hours of watching, and the last struggle of human life. And before the first glimmering of dawn stole through the closed shutters, she rose and went to the window, and sat there gazing into the vacant street, listening to the silence of the great city. The twilight dawn awoke, bringing

with it a dead rumbling sound. Some heavy cart or waggon was setting forth on its long journey into the country, and rolled heavily along; then a footstep was heard on the pavement, whilst a passenger wended his way slowly and stealthily, as though fearful that some face from the closed and veiled windows would look forth to discover the business which drew him forth at that unwonted hour. At length the light of morning made its way through the murky haze which shut out the sky; and with it came lighter sounds of market carts, and cabs driving up to their station; and passengers passed more frequently, and men stopped and greeted each other beneath the window. And when the great current of London life was once more flowing on in its full and wondrous vigour, Susan utterly exhausted, crept to her bed, and fell asleep; the striking of the clock from the churches in the vicinity, mingling with her last waking thoughts, and seeming to echo in her ears, "Be kind to her, Claude; be kind."

She slept, and her dreams were troubled. She was in a vast church; crowds filled it, familiar forms glided in and out amongst the tall pillars, and before the altar stood Claude with Helen by his side—lovely in her bridal dress, yet with a look of trouble on her brow. And then it was all changed, and it was Susan herself who knelt by Claude, and felt his hand clasping hers, icy as though it had been with the touch of death; and again all was dark, confused, and a deep pit had opened before her, and Claude was leading her to the brink, and bidding her look in, for Helen lay there. She started, and awoke to hear her mother's sweet voice asking if she felt able to rise; and with the half-consciousness of those first waking moments, Susan clung to Mrs. Graham, and murmured, "Keep me, mamma; don't let me dream again. I am wicked in my dreams; keep me."

CHAPTER LXIII.

MRS. GRAHAM was to leave London at twelve; but Claude was to go down to the Lodge by a night train, make whatever arrangements might be needful there, and return to London the following day. He was at Cavendish Square in time for breakfast. Susan was downstairs. There was no agitation now; nothing but that composed self-possession which might have been

called stoicism. Neither did she seem ill or over tired, her usual powers of judging and acting for every one seemed restored to her ; and even her mother forgot to remind her not to do too much.

Claude talked to her a good deal, and consulted her. No allusion was made to any thing but immediate questions of business, not even to the grief which every one shared. The world's necessities had for the hour closed upon all that deep underlying sorrow, a strong power kept it down ; only now and then one might be seen to steal apart from the rest, and stand in silent thought, or perhaps dash away a rising tear, but no one dared give way.

"Half-past eleven !" said Mrs. Graham, taking out her watch, and then glancing round the deserted rooms.

"The carriage is just come," said Claude. "You will have plenty of time."

"Isabella is late, as usual," said Mrs. Graham. "Susan, my love, go and call her, will you ?"

Susan went, and returned with a report that Isabella was in distress about her desk and portfolio ; she could not find room for them.

"And her trunk is not fastened then ?" said Mrs. Graham, looking very vexed. "We shall certainly be late. She must come and leave it."

But Susan brought back another message. Isabella did not like to leave her treasures to any care but her own. If she might be allowed to wait and see her trunk corded, and follow in the cab, it would be all right. She and Martha might go together.

"I can't allow that. Isabella must come with me, and Martha will see to every thing," said Mrs. Graham.

"Martha will be sure to be late, if she is left alone," said Anna.

"Let me stay, mamma," said Susan. "You can trust me to be in time ; and Barnes will help me in any thing there may be to be done, and he will come with us to the station. We shall be there nearly as soon as you."

Mrs. Graham looked very doubtful.

"It is the best plan," said Claude. "Miss Graham, I know, is always punctual ; and we shall have time to get the tickets, and see to the rest of the luggage, if we start at once."

"I don't like leaving Susan ; she is not well enough to have any thing to do," said Mrs. Graham.

Claude looked up quickly. "Not well? I am so very sorry. Are you really not well?"

"Quite, thank you," said Susan, shortly. "Mamma, indeed you must consent."

"You and Isabella—I don't like it," was the reply.

"And Barnes, dearest mother. You will see us following you before you have turned the corner." Susan put her mother's shawl round her, and gave her her carriage bag.

Barnes came in to hasten them. The carriage was packed, and they had no time to lose.

"And there is the cab ready too," said Anna. "Never mind Isabella's fidgets, Susan. She must carry her desk in her hand."

Mrs. Graham went into the hall. She could not bear to be seen as she said good-bye to the servants.

Claude turned to Susan. "It troubles me to think you are ill; you must give yourself rest when you reach home."

Susan tried to speak and smile, but tears came instead. He held her hand so kindly, almost tenderly; it seemed as though he longed to give way to some pent-up feelings. And then he tore himself from her; and she watched him as he handed her mother and Anna into the carriage, and turned back to the dark room, and felt as though it were flooded with sunshine.

The carriage drove off, and Susan went upstairs. The trunk was still open, the housemaid and Isabella were vainly trying to close it. Isabella was nearly crying; her spirits often gave way under pressure. She yielded at once, however, to Susan, who insisted that the trunk should be fastened directly, and the writing-desk left as a separate parcel. But then the key of the trunk was missing, and some little time was spent in searching for it; and when it was found and the box corded, and carried down stairs, the blotting-book, as well as the writing-desk, was seen lying on the table. That completely overcame Isabella, she could not imagine what to do with it; and her mamma disliked having so many parcels. She might have remained pondering the difficulty for many precious minutes, but that Susan quietly decided the point, by taking the unfortunate cause of offence under her own charge. Barnes was visibly impatient, and gave his directions in a loud voice to the cabman, to drive as fast as he could, and take the shortest way. The latter injunction was unfortunate; the shortest way was through a crowded thoroughfare, and a heavy dray and an omnibus blocked up the passage. Barnes scolded; the cabman shouted; the omnibus driver returned a volley of abuse. When at last the cab emerged from

the scene of confusion, Susan looked at her watch, but made no remark.

"Just in time, I declare," said Isabella, as they stood upon the platform of the railway station; "and there is mamma, in that farthest carriage!" They hurried down the line.

"It moves," exclaimed Susan.

"Just off, ma'am," said a railway porter at her side. And the train rushed away. Isabella uttered a faint scream. Susan stood for a moment confounded, and then said: "Mamma saw us, so she won't be anxious; we must go by the next train;" and she walked towards the waiting-room.

"I am very sorry. I am afraid it is my fault," began Isabella, in an exculpatory tone; "but we should have been quite in time, if it had not been for that dreadful omnibus and the dray. What will mamma say? And look, there is Mr. Egerton."

Susan stopped involuntarily.

"I don't want him to see us," said Isabella; and Susan moved on a few steps, but slowly.

Claude was looking for them. He came up, seeming much more vexed than Susan, and complaining of the cabman.

"It is my fault," said Isabella, humbly.

"It is every one's fault and no one's," observed Susan. "There is no good in thinking about it. We can wait here, very well, for the next train," she added, addressing Claude.

"Yes; but I don't like your travelling alone. I wish—if I had only known it before, I could have managed to go with you."

"Two ladies can't come to any harm," said Susan. "I don't like to feel so dependent."

"No, you like to be useful always. I know that. If you are going to the waiting-room, you must let me get you some luncheon first."

"We had some biscuits before we came away," said Isabella.

"I don't think we want any thing more."

"And your luggage?"

"Barnes has taken care of it. He will be here again in time for the next train."

They stopped at the door of the waiting-room.

"I won't trust to Barnes; I will come back for you myself, before the train starts," said Claude.

Isabella's arm was within that of her sister's, and some sudden movement made her look at Susan, and ask if she was tired.

"Only a little; we had better go in and sit down." She turned to Claude: "Thank you very much for looking after us,

but don't trouble yourself to come again. Barnes will do very well."

Claude smiled. "I shall trouble myself. Four o'clock, I think. Good-bye till then;" and he walked away.

Isabella made Susan lie down on one of the sofas; the room was empty, and the quietness was a luxury. Susan closed her eyes, and Isabella took out a book, thinking, perhaps, she would fall asleep. But if she did, it was only for a moment, and she started up almost immediately, asking if it was time to move, and glancing at the door eagerly, as though expecting some one to enter. Isabella laughed at her, and begged her to lie down again; but Susan refused, and said she would write a note;—she had not said good-bye to Helen,—there had not been time, and it would seem unkind to leave London without a word. "I may use your writing things, I suppose?" she added.

Isabella nodded assent, and went on reading. It was a long time before she looked up again. When she did, it was in consequence of a sound of rather quick, nervous breathing. Several people were in the room now: she did not know from whence it came.

"The lady is not very well, ma'am, I think," said a respectable looking woman, apparently a nurse, who was standing near the table with a child in her arms. She handed a bottle of salts to Susan, whose face was very pale. Susan did not see it, she beckoned to Isabella,—a folded paper was in her hand. "Whose is this? How did you come by it?" she asked, anxiously, but quite quietly.

"What? I don't understand." Isabella took the paper from her.

"I found it in the blotting-book accidentally," said Susan; "I thought it belonged to myself,—I did not read it all through. Isabella, what does it mean,—is it yours?"

Isabella rapidly glanced at it, and a look of extreme perplexity came over her face, followed by an expression of sudden recollection. "Oh! I remember,—yes,—there is no mystery, only I have been careless. Mamma or Mr. Egerton must have left it in the dressing-room, the day before yesterday. I put it away, and forgot it. What makes you look so strange, Susan?"

"Do I look strange?" Susan tried to smile.

"Yes; is it about the letter? it seems a very odd one."

"Mr. Egerton left it, did he?" asked Susan.

"He may have done it, or mamma, I can't say. I saw there was something in it about Helen."

Susan kept the letter in her hand, but without looking at it. "I remember now," continued Isabella, "that Mr. Egerton came back into the dressing-room, and carried away an envelope from amongst the papers near my writing-desk,—this must have belonged to it."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Isabella returned to her book, Susan took up a pen, wrote a few words, and laid it down again. The room was becoming crowded, for another train was going off. Isabella's attention was drawn away from her sister. She did not see—no one saw or noticed—the change in Susan's countenance,—the look of intense thought, of indecision, then of sudden resolution, and again of doubt. Susan's mind was a chaos, her judgment seemed to have failed her.

The paper—she knew well what it was. It was the letter to which her mother had referred,—which would prove Madame Reinhard to be insincere and Captain Mordaunt unworthy. And it was needful, above all things, that Helen should have it at once, the delay of an hour might, so Susan believed, be of consequence. But there was no one to take it or send it, no one who would venture to interfere.

Only Susan herself. The pulsation of her heart stopped for an instant, as the thought occurred to her, and then it went on with sickening rapidity. All the difficulties, doubts, questionings, attendant upon such a step, thronged upon her; she had not time to disentangle and combat with them separately. Minutes were hurrying on; if she waited, it would be impossible to go to Helen,—and without seeing her, interference might be useless.

Yet Susan could not resolve at once. She had little doubt of her mother's approval, of Claude's gratitude. Her cousin loved and trusted, and would listen to her. A few words from her, and with such proof before her, Helen would be safe and free. But it was the suggestion of the tempter which whispered, that Helen's freedom might be her own misery. A terrified sense of weakness for one moment overpowered her, the next she went up to her sister.

"Isabella, I have something very much on my mind to say to Helen; I can't write it; I must see her. You will be quite safe in remaining here, and I shall be back long before the train starts."

Isabella gazed at her in amazement. "Going to Grosvenor Place by yourself! Susan, you are mad!"

"Hush! hush! don't keep me, I must go. Minutes are precious. Stay here and read." Susan attempted to smile. "Don't look at me in that strange way. I know what I am doing."

"But I will go with you ; I can't let you go alone." Isabella fastened the strings of her bonnet.

Susan laid her hand quietly upon Isabella's arm ; all excitement of manner was gone, as she said : " I am doing what mamma would wish, and I am going alone. If Mr. Egerton should come, tell him — no don't say where I am gone, only that I had thought of something which I was obliged to do."

Almost before Isabella could find words to continue her expostulations, Susan had sent a porter for a cab, and was on her way to Grosvenor Place.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THAT afternoon Lady Augusta Clare sat at work finishing her altar-carpet. A very complacent, satisfied smile was on her lips. She looked at her stitches affectionately, every now and then held them at a little distance to admire their regularity, whilst occasionally she turned the pages of a volume of Thomas-à-Kempis, red-lined, and bound massively, which lay open before her.

Whether Lady Augusta's unwonted softness and serenity were to be attributed to the altar-carpet or the devotional book might have been doubtful. Unkind judges probably would have said that they were due to neither, for certainly, when the door opened, and Helen came in, Lady Augusta's first words might have suggested that something rather more worldly was at the root of her good humour.

"My dear love, I have been longing to see you this morning. But you have been too happy, I suppose, to think of me. Is dear Constantine gone?"

"Captain Mordaunt is talking to papa in the study, I believe," said Helen.

Her tone betrayed no feeling of any kind, neither did her countenance.

"I hope I shall see him before he goes," said Lady Augusta ; "I have some plans in my head, which will please you, my darling."

"Thank you," said Helen ; "I dare say they will do very well."

"More than that, I trust. Of course your father and I wish to further your happiness in every way. You can never enjoy yourself younger."

"Never," said Helen, a little sarcastically.

"And you would like a continental tour so much," continued Lady Augusta. "We are quite bent upon your going abroad after your wedding, and we talk of following you."

Helen could with difficulty repress an exclamation of disagreeable surprise; but she managed to say that it might be a good arrangement.

"It will give us the opportunity of meeting you again sooner than we otherwise should," continued Lady Augusta; "and we shall long to do that. Maurice, too, may be able to accompany us, if we wait till the end of the season. I feel sure it will add to dear Constantine's pleasure to have him with him."

Helen was silent.

"I long to let your aunt know of your happiness," pursued Lady Augusta. "She will feel it even in the midst of her grief for the dear old Admiral. Ah! how quickly he has been taken from us! It does not do to set our hearts upon any thing in this world:" and Lady Augusta worked two stitches in her carpet as a comment upon her words.

"They are to leave London to-day," said Helen, shortly.

"So I understand. Poor Claude, no doubt, has to make all the arrangements. By-the-by, my love, I congratulate you now upon all awkwardness being over between you and him. You will meet quite upon a comfortable footing."

"Quite," said Helen. She turned away to the window, and, without looking at Lady Augusta again, said, "I have engaged to go to Richmond this afternoon; Madame Reinhard will be with me, and Captain Mordaunt will drive us."

A transient cloud of surprise came over Lady Augusta's face at this determined assertion of an independent will; but she replied most amiably,—"Just as you like, my love. Under the circumstances, you will, I know, wish to be as much as possible with dear Constantine."

"And to-morrow we go to the horticultural fête," continued Helen.

"Certainly, my love, if you wish it."

"And perhaps to the Duchess of Menteith's *soirée* afterwards," added Helen.

"Quite dissipated!" said Lady Augusta, in her sweetest tone. "And such a change!" she added, in an under voice, though loud enough for Helen to hear! "but love works wonders. Did dear Constantine tell you how the Earl was to-day, my love?"

"He says he is better," said Helen, bluntly. "The doctors declare he may live years yet."

"One can scarcely wish it," said Lady Augusta, sighing;—"such a suffering life as he has,—and so well prepared;—one can't help feeling it would be a happy release."

"He is not such an old man," replied Helen. "He is fifteen years younger than the Admiral."

"Constitution makes all the difference," said Lady Augusta; "his has been broken for years. But, speaking of the Admiral, have you had any message or note from Susan to-day?"

"I had a few lines from my aunt last night," said Helen,— "just wishing me good-bye. Susan, she said, was not well enough to write."

Lady Augusta looked as though she expected to see the note; but Helen made no offer of showing it.

"Susan will feel the Admiral's loss severely," said Lady Augusta, "unless — has it struck you lately, Helen, that she and poor Claude have been very much together?"

"I don't know any thing about them," was Helen's answer; and she moved away from the window, and walked out of the room, slowly, till the door was closed, and then rushed up the stairs to her own apartment, turned the bolt violently, and paced her chamber in a storm of indignation.

She had no doubt as to the wisdom of her decision now. Live with Lady Augusta! It would be better a thousand times to marry Captain Mordaunt. Penances! purgatory! were nothing to this moral torture. Such utter ignorance of her feelings!—such a betrayal of double motives!—hypocrisy — worldliness! Another such conversation, and she would be driven frantic. And Helen, in her excited sensitiveness, walked up and down, believing herself a martyr, and stifling any uneasy suggestions of conscience as to her own great offences, by the angry consideration of Lady Augusta's want of tact and good feeling.

Annette knocked at the door twice without being heard; the third time she was answered by a harsh, "Come in;" and, when she entered, stood for a moment, afraid to speak.

That was often the case now: the bright and affectionate Helen Clare was grievously changed of late. Few dared to interrupt or intrude upon her unsummoned.

"Miss Graham in the drawing-room, Mademoiselle," said Annette, whilst she glanced doubtfully at Helen.

Helen turned to her sharply. "Miss Graham! You are mistaken; she has left London."

"Pardon, Mademoiselle! she is wishing to speak to you; she begs to come to your own room; she has no time to spare."

"Neither have I," murmured Helen: yet she went up to the glass, gazed at her own lovely yet haggard face, strove to look calm and unruffled, and again said, "she may come."

Annette drew near cautiously. "Captain Mordaunt, he saw me in the corridor; he gave me this little note, Mademoiselle. He returns at three o'clock."

Helen would not take the note, and Annette laid it on the table. It was unopened till Susan was heard coming on the stairs; then it was read through hastily, and thrown aside. Helen received such little notes now at all hours of the day; it was Captain Mordaunt's fashion of showing his tenderness.

A gentle tap at the door, very unlike Annette's quick demand for admission, was heard by Helen directly. Susan came in, without haste or agitation,—without even saying that she had but a few minutes to spare. There was that in her countenance which told of a will which held in check every feeling of womanish nervousness or weakness,—a self-control so great, that it acted, as if by magic, upon Helen; and the cousins kissed each other silently and tenderly; and Susan said in her slow, measured voice, "I have come to you suddenly, dear Helen; but I was not able to write. We leave London at four, and I had something to say to you before we go."

"Any thing serious? of consequence?" exclaimed Helen, whilst the excitable spirit flashed in her quick, dark eyes.

A momentary pause. Then Susan said, "Helen, are you engaged to Captain Mordaunt?"

She asked the question so quietly, that Helen could not help answering it in the same tone.

"Yes."

A momentary feeling, difficult to interpret, might have been seen on Susan's face. She sat in silent thought.

"You don't like it," said Helen.

"I wish that you did not," replied Susan.

"It is freedom," said Helen. "Susan, you won't despise me?" and she leaned her head upon her cousin's shoulder, and gave way to a flood of bitter tears.

Susan allowed the tears to flow for some moments; and Helen started up suddenly, and one of those brilliant smiles which formed the peculiar beauty of her face flashed across it; but it ended in withering sarcasm, as she murmured, "I do what others do; it is all a lottery."

"It is certainly, in some cases," said Susan. "Helen, if you were not engaged, I would kneel to you, to beg you to pause."

Susan's words were earnest, but her tone was not. Helen smiled, as she said, "You are come to reason with me from duty."

"Yes, from duty," repeated Susan, abstractedly.

"And I must not listen to you from duty," said Helen. "It is too late."

Susan was silent.

"We will talk of something else," said Helen. "Tell me about your mother."

Susan's hand shook as she opened her carriage bag. Instead of replying to Helen's question, she put a paper into her hands.

"I don't understand; you frighten me," said Helen, scarcely looking at it.

"Will you read it?" Susan walked to the further end of the room, and stood before a book-case; but she sat down again soon, for her knees trembled.

She did not look towards Helen, till a hand was pressed upon her shoulder, and a hollow voice said, with a harsh attempt at a laugh, "This is an absurdity. Whose is it?"

"Madame Reinhard's," said Susan; "you see her signature; you know the handwriting. It is addressed, as you perceive, to the Baroness d'Olban."

Helen tossed it from her, scornfully. "Madame Reinhard does not know the Baroness!" Yet she took up the letter again, and speaking through her closed lips, said, "it is a good imitation; a clever device also. So it is said that Captain Mordaunt has done me the honour to make me the subject of his bets. I thank you, Susan, much, for your information, but the matter will easily be set at rest. Captain Mordaunt will soon discover the writer; only do me the favour to tell me how the precious document came into your possession."

"It was found by me accidentally," said Susan; "but it was —" she stopped, and her voice trembled. "Helen, I believe Mr. Egerton knows more of it than I do."

"Claude!" exclaimed Helen, indignantly. "Claude lend himself to a plot!" her eyes flashed. "Susan, if he were to tell me so himself, I would not believe it."

"No stratagem, dearest Helen," said Susan; and as she touched her cousin's arm kindly, her hand was shaken off impatiently. "How can it be one? and why should Mr. Egerton wish to interfere?" She spoke the last words doubtfully.

"Yes, why should he wish?" repeated Helen, in a tone of unutterable mournfulness which touched a chord of keen self-reproach in Susan's heart. She went on eagerly: "You were right

in coming, Susan ; it shall be found out. Don't think me ungrateful ; it shall be found out."

"But there is nothing to find," said Susan, quietly. "It is true."

Helen laughed satirically. "True, that Madame Reinhard has deceived me ; has told falsehoods ? I would sooner believe that the sun had ceased to shine in the heavens ; she does not know the Baroness. And for Captain Mordaunt, — Susan, whatever you may think of him," and Helen drew herself up proudly, "he is a gentleman."

"Then let him act like one," exclaimed Susan. "Helen, dearest, listen to me but for one moment ; I have so few to spare. It is true, all true ; they have been playing with you ; you have thrown yourself away ; you must be wretched. But there is still time. Oh, listen, listen ! Claude says it ; Claude cares about it." Susan's tone grew sharper, more vehement ; the words seemed forced from her as she uttered them, and still, whilst Helen averted her face, she repeated, "Claude knows all ; Claude would give worlds to save you."

Helen turned her ghastly countenance towards her cousin. "It must not be true ; Susan, — I have promised."

"But draw back."

"And be stamped by the world a second time as a jilt," murmured Helen ; and she covered her face with her hands. Looking up again the next moment, she added, eagerly, "But it is not true ; there is falsehood on the face of it."

"Inquire," said Susan. "Madame Reinhard will tell you."

"And will know that I suspect her of untruth," said Helen. "It can't be. Susan, you mean kindly. Yet see what I think." She was about to tear the letter in pieces, but Susan caught it from her.

"Think what you will, Helen ; but you have no right to do that. Follow your fate, if you choose."

"Not if I choose," exclaimed Helen, interrupting her, — "if I must."

Her mocking laugh thrilled upon Susan's ears with a sense of terror. She seized Helen's hand, and her tone was tremulous in its earnestness.

"Helen, I should not dare to speak, if I were not sure that Captain Mordaunt is unworthy, — quite sure. Claude could not be mistaken, and he is so anxious, so miserable. Only inquire ; ask, for his sake," she added, in a changed and hollow voice.

Helen murmured to herself, "Not for his sake," and Susan's heart bounded, as though the weight of worlds had been removed from it.

"You think me weak and blind," continued Helen, firmly. "I am neither. What I have chosen to do I have done with my eyes open. For this miserable document, I neither know, nor wish to know, what it means. It is sufficient evidence against it that it professes to be written by Madame Reinhard to the Baroness d'Olban, and that its tone shows this to be an impossibility. I choose to trust my friends, and I will inquire no further."

Susan walked towards the door, but returned suddenly. "I heard Madame Reinhard's voice in the hall, as I came up the stairs. If you don't choose to ask her yourself if the letter is hers, you can have no objection to my asking."

"I have; I do object," exclaimed Helen, vehemently. "The letter is a disgrace, a libel. I don't believe it. I won't allow Madame Reinhard to be insulted. Susan, in this house, you would not dare do it."

"I would dare do any thing that should open your eyes," replied Susan. "Helen, you are afraid."

The burning colour rushed to Helen's cheeks, then faded away, and left them colourless. She made no answer.

Susan put her hand upon the bell. "Annette will ask Madame Reinhard to come to us."

Helen sat down, clenching tightly the arm of her chair.

"Madame Reinhard is in the study," said Susan, as Annette appeared at the door. "Ask her if she will have the goodness to come to Miss Clare's room."

"It is your doing," said Helen, reproachfully.

"Mine entirely. We need not shrink from truth!" Yet Susan, while she said the words, leaned against the wall for support.

"*Mein armes Kind!* you are ill then," was Madame Reinhard's exclamation, as she rushed into the room, and threw her arms round Helen. "Why did you not send me word before? why keep me from you?"

"It was I who sent the message," said Susan, coming forward.

Madame Reinhard started. "Ah! Miss Graham! So surprised I am; so little expecting the honour, the pleasure. But my sweet Helen, she is quite ill, surely?"

Helen looked up at her, smiled, but did not speak. Madame Reinhard appealed to Susan for an explanation.

"Helen has been fretted this morning," said Susan, and unconsciously there was a slight bitterness in her tone.

"Ah! yes, there are many things to fret one. This is a very uncomfortable world. *Meine Liebe*, what shall I do for you?"

"Helen will be quite satisfied if you will only tell her whether

this letter is yours," said Susan; and in an instant she placed the letter before Madame Reinhard and looked at her steadily.

"Mine! my letter! Miss Graham!" Madame Reinhard took the letter from Susan's hand, and there was a visible change in her countenance.

"It is yours, I believe," said Susan; and Helen raised her eyes to Madame Reinhard, and, as she waited for a reply, withdrew from the caressing arm which was laid upon her neck.

Madame Reinhard laughed. "*Mein Liebes Herz!* and you care for the nonsense, the joke! too silly."

"Is it yours?" said Helen, in a faltering voice.

"What can it signify? and how did you have it?" Madame Reinhard became indignant as she addressed Susan. "So unladylike! so low! so mean!"

"What I am is nothing to the present purpose," replied Susan, quietly. "I think, Helen, your question is answered."

"No! it is not answered," exclaimed Madame Reinhard. "I will proclaim to the world, I will let it be known what Miss Graham is. *Ma pauvre petite!*" Again she would have caressed Helen, but there was the same steady repulsion; Helen did not even look at her.

"It shall be a public disgrace, a dishonour," continued Madame Reinhard, passionately; "for myself, what care I!" and, changing her tone, she tried to laugh. "You ask me about the letter. Suppose it to be mine. Suppose I write to a friend about things near my heart, and all but settled. Suppose I repeat the nonsense I have heard?"

"Nonsense!" said Helen, and the tone of her voice for a moment silenced Madame Reinhard.

"It is scarcely nonsense," continued Susan, "to repeat to a person like the Baroness d'Olban the things you have heard from Helen in strict confidence; still less can it be nonsense to tell them to Captain Mordaunt, and to encourage him to make a bet publicly, that with your help, Helen Clare shall consent to be his wife, willing or not willing, before another week has passed."

Helen involuntarily shuddered, and Susan stooped and kissed her forehead.

"The Baroness d'Olban spoken of in that way!" exclaimed Madame Reinhard. "Miss Graham, you will answer for your words."

"You spoke of her yourself," said Helen, in a faint voice. "You told me that you were scarcely acquainted with her."

"At first, of course; one is but a slight acquaintance at first;

and I did hear things: it follows not they are true. *Meine Liebe*, it must not be that you judge me so. Let me talk to you by myself." She glanced impatiently at Susan.

"I shall keep you but a very few minutes," said Susan. "Helen, Madame Reinhard deceives you. She has long been the intimate friend of the Baroness d'Olban. I could prove that without the help of the letter. A person, whom we both depend upon, knows it."

"A person! hear her, Helen," exclaimed Madame Reinhard. "I will tell you all. Do I not see it as if it were written before me? She leagues with that Mr. Egerton; she spies upon you and upon me. He has been at my house: he knows my friends; it is his scheme. He does not forgive, and he would revenge; he would not see you happy."

Susan smiled coldly. "Helen, dearest," she said, "you are convinced." But Helen could not speak; only bitter, scalding tears coursed each other down her cheeks.

"Monsieur le Capitaine will have Mr. Egerton answer for this," said Madame Reinhard.

Helen clasped her hands together in terror.

Susan whispered to her, "An idle threat! Now or never you must have courage." She spoke aloud to Madame Reinhard, "You have brought in Mr. Egerton's name unjustifiably. It is I who am answerable for this, and I only. Helen, before I go, promise me that this miserable engagement shall be put an end to."

"And take the consequences," exclaimed Madame Reinhard. "Let Mr. Egerton meet Captain Mordaunt if he dare."

Susan held her cousin's trembling hand. "Helen, darling, trust me, the blame is mine, only save yourself."

"She deceived me," murmured Helen.

"And Captain Mordaunt," said Susan; "what of him?"

The contraction of Helen's brow showed the feeling which his name aroused.

"Twice a jilt," said Madame Reinhard, sarcastically. "I know your English word."

Helen started from her seat. "Who dares call me that?" but she sank down again and murmured, "It will be true."

"It will not be true!" exclaimed Susan. "You were deceived by false appearances, and you have a full right to draw back."

"And Sir Henry, and Miladi Augusta, and the kind world?" said Madame Reinhard, coolly.

"Mamma!" murmured Helen. "Susan, I dare not."

"Dare not be honest! Oh, Helen, how low have you sunk!"

Helen groaned in bitterness of spirit.

Madame Reinhard put her arm round her; but Helen drew herself away as from the touch of a serpent.

Susan looked at her watch. "There are but a few minutes more: come with me now, Helen, to Lady Augusta. Let the world blame you; and grant that it may have cause for blame, yet you will have some always to love and care for you,—my mother, myself, Claude——"

"Not him! not him!" murmured Helen.

"Yes, Claude," repeated Susan; and the unselfish nobleness of her nature gave force to the words which jarred upon the very tenderest chord of her own heart. "He has never ceased to be your friend. It is not in his nature to forget."

"Only to be comforted," observed Madame Reinhard, bitterly. "You see, *meine Liebe*, it is as I said; Miss Graham and Mr. Egerton they are one."

"Was not that a carriage which stopped?" exclaimed Helen. She rushed to the window. "Mamma is going out. I can't see her."

Susan, instead of replying, drew her gently to the door.

"I congratulate you," said Madame Reinhard.

Helen turned to her with sudden composure: "You may congratulate me," she said. "Whatever may be the end, Madame Reinhard, at least, will never again have the opportunity of deceiving me."

She followed Susan down the stairs, and paused at the entrance of Lady Augusta's boudoir. "Let me go in alone; wait for me in the drawing-room."

Susan whispered, "God help you, dearest!" and Helen opened the door.

But the room was empty. She hurried again into the passage. Susan was in the drawing-room, and Helen joined her there. In that interval Lady Augusta passed down the staircase, and the rattle of the carriage wheels was the announcement that she had driven off.

Helen looked at her cousin with a face of utter despair. "You see," she said, "it is all against me."

"Never! never! Helen; it will save you from a life-long repentance."

"If you could only stay with me," murmured Helen.

"Impossible! I have not even now three minutes. Only promise that it shall be done."

Helen trembled as she said, "I promise."

And Susan kissed her tenderly, and whispered again, "God help you!" And in another minute she was driving through the streets, amid the whirl of business and pleasure, with one thought in her heart, that she had saved Helen for the present, and that the future lay with God.

Helen had but a short private interview with Lady Augusta that evening, very much shorter than she had anticipated. Lady Augusta came home from her drive full of excitement. She had been making a round of visits, announcing to her friends dear Helen's approaching marriage with Constantine Mordaunt, so soon to be Earl of Harford. She had received congratulations, heard from all quarters that she was the best, wisest, kindest of step-mothers, and had owned that she was at the summit of her expectations. Something perhaps in the unusual flow of spirits which the circumstances occasioned, and the heat of the weather, which happened to be great, brought on a violent headache; but she would not yield to it. When her maid came to dress her for dinner, she insisted upon seeing Helen, and talking with her about her wedding dress. Helen went to her as a culprit. Lady Augusta's first question was, "How did you enjoy your drive to Richmond?"

"I did not go, mamma," was the reply. The tone and manner were very peculiar.

Lady Augusta turned round sharply, and curiously. "You did not go, Helen? And Madame Reinhard, and Constantine?"

"They may have gone; I can't say."

Helen had not the least intention of being aggravating; she was too much afraid of the task before her willingly to increase the irritation which she discovered in Lady Augusta's manner. But her very timidity was her danger.

"I don't understand you; you are playing with me, Helen."

"Not playing at all, mamma, only in very serious earnest." Helen's voice softened, and there was something beseeching in her accent.

Lady Augusta raised her hand to her head. Helen saw that her face was flushed, and there was an expression in her eyes which was unusual. She begged her to sit down, and offered her some eau de Cologne, and Lady Augusta bathed her temples, and owned she felt strange and ill; but she persisted in her inquiry. Helen tried to evade it; and the evasion increased Lady Augusta's agitation. It seemed as though the secret misgiving lurked in her mind, ready to break forth at any moment.

"I have been thinking about your wedding dress," she said.

"Have you, mamma? I am sorry you should have given yourself the trouble."

"Why call it trouble? What do you mean?" Lady Augusta's tone was fierce, and again she pressed her hand upon her brow.

"We won't talk about it just at present," said Helen, for she felt frightened.

"But we must talk about it; there is something hidden,—I will know. Helen!"—the suspicion burst forth,—“you would not dare play false a second time?”

Helen trembled violently. She said in a faltering voice, “I will explain what I feel another time, but I think Captain Mordaunt has not treated me quite as he ought.”

Lady Augusta gazed upon her wonderingly and incredulously. “Changed since this afternoon! changed! changed!” she repeated.

“Only from things I have heard,” said Helen, speaking very gently. “They must be inquired into. But not now, mamma, not now; you are ill. I am sure you are,” she added, taking Lady Augusta's hand.

“I am not ill; I am well.” Lady Augusta caught her hand away, and stood up; her face was crimson. “Helen you have been my torment from your infancy.”

Helen was proudly silent.

“Yes,” continued Lady Augusta, “you have thwarted me in every thing—all my wishes have been disappointed. You have made yourself a mark for the world; every one points at me because of your conduct. But it shall not be again”—the tones of her voice became louder. “You shall promise me that you will never treat Constantine Mordaunt as you did Claude Egerton.”

She waited for a reply, her eyes riveted, and her figure immovable. If it had been an hour before Helen answered, it seemed that she would still have remained in the same fixed attitude.

“I cannot promise, mamma. I can prove to you that Captain Mordaunt is —” But Helen dared not finish her sentence, for Lady Augusta sank into a chair, her face working with convulsive agitation. Helen drew near, but she was motioned away. Lady Augusta's countenance expressed the most racking pain and mental excitement.

Helen, now excessively alarmed, touched the bell, but Lady Augusta started forward to prevent her. The exertion was followed by reaction, and she fell back in a kind of stupor.

A telegraphic message that evening carried the intelligence to Wingfield, that Lady Augusta Clare was attacked with brain fever, and that her life was in danger.

CHAPTER LXV.

AMONG the many scenes upon which the eye of the traveller rests, as he wanders through foreign lands, there are perhaps only a few which imprint themselves indelibly on the memory. The greater part fade both in colouring and in the distinctness of their outline, as years go by. The general impression — the soul, if it may be so called — leaves its trace; we feel what we have looked upon, but we cannot recall it. Yet some recollections there are upon which the hand of time seems to have no power. The current of life bears us rapidly away, and its cares call our attention aside, and give us no leisure for imagination; but the beauty once gazed upon, has become “a joy for ever.” Still it appears before us, unlooked for, unsummoned; still it paints itself to our fancy in the heaped-up masses of the stormy clouds, and the vivid colouring of the sunset sky; and even as it rises there follows the intense, eager longing to look upon it once more, which would seem to belong only to the love called forth by a living being, the yearning for the absent and the dead.

There is a narrow pass between the mountains which separate the southern Tyrol from the Austrian province of Venice.

Some fifty years ago, it was probably traversed by few but the people of the country. Now, a road, broad and smooth, passes along the base of the mighty hills, and tracks the course of the little river Rienz, leading by a continuous but gradual ascent from the Pusterthal to the vale of Ampezzo. Along this road, the English traveller rolls in his easy carriage, troops of soldiers march on their way to the Austrian provinces, and the stream of commercial traffic passes from Bavaria and the Tyrol to the seaports of Trieste and Venice.

Yet the Ampezzo pass can never be any thing but solitary — solitary in spirit. The jagged peaks of the dolomite mountains stand apart, holding no communion with the pettiness of human interests. They lift their pointed summits, sharp as gigantic needles, to the sky; and the gloomy cliffs which form their base stand proudly inaccessible to the foot of man. Wonderful indeed they are both in form and colouring: in parts black, as though some huge hand had stained their rugged precipices with pitch; in parts tinged with a pale yellow, and again exhibiting a surface of deep, bright red. Peak above peak they rise; their keen heads looking down upon the solemn pine forests

which clothe their sides ; whilst behind, peering over all, may be seen a far distant summit, steeped, glowing, fused in the light which is neither of Heaven nor of earth, but which mingles the glories of each, the hue of sunset upon snow.

Such at least was the appearance of the mountains as a party of English travellers, on their way from Inspruck to Venice, journeyed through the Ampezzo pass, late in an evening towards the close of summer. An elderly lady, thin and haggard, and propped up by cushions, and evidently wearied by the distance which she had already travelled, leaned back in the luxurious carriage, with her eyes closed ; or, if she opened them, casting a vacant glance around her, as though she did not understand why she should be there, and inquiring how much farther they must go before they stopped for the night.

By her side sat a young girl, pale and worn likewise, so worn indeed, that at the first glance the perfect outline of her very lovely features would scarcely have attracted remark. But bodily fatigue seemed to have no power over her, as bending from the carriage, she gazed intently upon the rocks, every now and then uttering some ejaculation of wonder and delight, and the next moment turning to the invalid with a word of apology or thoughtfulness, arranging the pillows, and suggesting, "We shall be there very soon now ! Pietro says so."

The back seat of the carriage was occupied by a tall, grey-haired gentleman, busied with Murray's Handbook ; and another lady, young, with no marked beauty, nothing striking in figure or manner, unless it might be an air of thoughtful self-control and repose. She too was engrossed by the scenery, but it was in a different way from her companion. There were no expressions of ecstasy : she sat quite still, and it seemed an effort to her to speak ; but there was a mist over her dark grey eyes, and occasionally she laid her hand gently upon that of her friend, and when their glances met, she smiled, and the smile was as a sunbeam of gladness lighting up some quiet home valley.

"Cortina d'Ampezzo, that was the place, wasn't it, Susan ?" said the gentleman, pointing to the name in the Handbook. "Stella d'Oro, clean, and honest,—one must look out for both those points now : these people are not so unsophisticated as our friends in the Tyrol."

"Lady Augusta will like the Italian cookery, I hope," said Susan ; "that is one great fault in the Tyrol ; one can't afford to have a fastidious appetite."

Lady Augusta roused herself. "Are we getting to the end, Sir Henry ? I don't see any houses."

No one smiled; but Helen answered directly, "We are very near the top of the pass; and there Pietro will move on faster; and papa says it is a very good inn."

"Murray says so, not I," said Sir Henry: "what he calls good may be straw beds and sour bread."

"It is very hard," murmured Lady Augusta; "we would pay for every thing; we don't care what we pay. Pietro manages very badly; we ought to turn him away."

"Pietro is only the voiturier, my dear," said Sir Henry. "He does well enough what he professes; he can't answer for the inns."

Lady Augusta looked to Helen as if for protection. There was an expression of helplessness in her marked, hard features which was very sad.

"Annette will manage very comfortably for us," said Helen. "She has been abroad so much, she knows exactly what to do. You will quite enjoy your tea and your rest when they come, mamma. Now we really are at the top."

"I don't know what you call the top," said Lady Augusta; "we have not been going up hill at all. I can't think why you talk so, Helen; and Annette did not make my bed at all comfortable last night. We will go back, Sir Henry. I want to go back to England."

Helen sighed bitterly, and offered no reply.

"Pietro is taking off the horse he hired, I see," said Sir Henry, looking out. "That shows we shall have no more hills. I don't think we needed help, only Pietro is so careful. The Tyrol peasant will have a good journey to travel to-night, if he has to make his way back to the Pusterthal with his tired animal. That can't be Cortina d'Ampezzo, surely?" and he pointed to a small inn, little more than a hovel, by the wayside.

It was an unfortunate question, for it drew Lady Augusta's attention again to the fact that it was rapidly growing dark, and that there were no signs of a human habitation, except the shelter to which Sir Henry had alluded, and which had been originally intended for a hospice; and the ruins of a castle standing on the ridge of one of the nearest hills, and in former days commanding the approach to the Tyrol through the Ampezzo pass.

"I don't know why we came here," she began; but she was interrupted by Sir Henry, in the determined tone which betrays a secret misgiving.

"Don't trouble yourself, my dear; Cortina must be quite close now. Pietro,"—he summoned the voiturier to the carriage,—*"get on, man, quickly; we can't be out all night."*

Pietro, usually the most good-natured of *voituriers*, was a little out of heart, from the fact that he knew no more than Sir Henry of the exact distance his horses had still to travel. He mounted to his seat rather sullenly, gave his whip a very spiritless smack compared with that which he usually exhibited, and rounding the angle of the hill, turned his back upon the mountains, now growing gloomier and fiercer in their phantom grandeur, as the gathering darkness, and the last burning colouring of sunset enveloped their sharp peaks, and descended into the valley of Ampezzo.

The party in the carriage became silent. Lady Augusta again closed her eyes. Sir Henry turned round every instant, as if the action would hurry the horses, and make the distance shorter; and Susan looked back upon the mountains, and wrote the scene in her memory; whilst Helen's eye dwelt upon the wide opening valley, dark as one of Poussin's pictures, and her thoughts took their hue from the pine forests, and the twilight shadows, and it seemed to her an image of her life.

"We go to the *Stella d'Oro*, remember, Pietro," shouted Sir Henry, when the twinkle of a light was seen in the distance.

"Not near yet, sir," was the answer; and the *voiturier* quickened his pace.

"There is a carriage before us, I think," said Helen, leaning out; "I wonder whether they know the way better than we do."

"There is no mistaking the way in a country like this," said Sir Henry, impatiently; "you couldn't get out of the road if you wished it. Distance is the only thing,—a monstrous long journey it is."

"I wonder what hotel those people are going to," said Helen; "they will have the best choice of beds if we don't take care; not that it signifies for us, only for *mamma*."

"A choice of straw, I suspect it will be," said Sir Henry. "You don't expect to find London hotels here, Helen, do you?"

"I don't know what I expect," said Helen, sadly; "but *mamma* is so tired, she will be quite ill if we don't stop soon."

"We are stopping, it seems," said Sir Henry, as Pietro suddenly drew his horses up. "What's the matter now?"

"I should just like to know how much further we may go to look for Cortina," was the reply. "There's a party beyond at a stand still;" and Pietro let himself down from his seat, and called out to the *voiturier* of the vehicle before them. A short conversation, in a patois compounded of German and Italian, followed, at the close of which Pietro returned, with the information that it was a good way still.

"Ask what inn they go to," said Sir Henry; "ask if they know any thing about the Stella d'Oro. It won't do to give your mamma a bad night," he added, looking anxiously at Lady Augusta.

Pietro went back with his query. "The Post, or the Aquila Nera," called out an English voice, in the unmistakable accent of an English gentleman.

"Claude Egerton!" exclaimed Sir Henry, and he tried to push open the carriage door, but it resisted. The voiturier drove on, and Sir Henry finished his sentence quietly, by adding, "It couldn't have been though; he is kept at home."

Neither Susan nor Helen spoke again till they entered the village of Cortina d'Ampezzo, and stopped before the uninviting entrance of the Stella d'Oro.

CHAPTER LXVI.

"ONE person at least is happy to-night," said Helen, as she sat down upon the edge of a pallet-bed, literally the only piece of furniture in the bare apartment, considered one of the good bedrooms of the Stella d'Oro. "I thought Pietro would have kissed the landlord in his delight at hearing Italian spoken at last."

"It does not seem like Italy," said Susan. She had made a seat of her carpet bag, and was resting her back against the wall. "Are we both to sleep in that bed, Helen? as they say this is the only room we can have."

"I could sleep upon the ground," said Helen, "if it were only clean." She put the candle down upon the floor, and examined it.

"Better not," said Susan; "'what the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve.'"

"But the body does, unfortunately," observed Helen. "Poor mamma! If they put her into a bed like this, what will become of her? Stuffed with straw actually! I thought papa was laughing at me; and such hills and valleys! However, it will remind one of the Ampezzo pass."

"One shall scarcely need to be reminded of that," said Susan.

"No;"—Helen paused;—"it was a longing of my childhood to travel. I remember once when I was a very little thing, and had been hearing people talk about it, I prayed that I might. When

the prayer is granted, I suppose one ought not to murmur at the way."

"What have you done with Lady Augusta?" asked Susan rather abruptly.

"Left her with Annette. I tried to do what I could, but it wouldn't do. She says she is cold, and she has had the stove lighted; she will find it too much by and by, but one can't help it. It will make that odd ante-room comfortable for papa. Annette has taken out the back of the stove which opens into it, and now it looks like an English fireplace. One likes that in spite of being in Italy."

"It must be cold so high as we are," said Susan. "It is cold now."

"The Post or the Aquila Nera might have been better than this," said Helen.

"Yes," was the only reply. Susan rose from her carpet bag, and unlocked it.

"Was it Claude Egerton?" said Helen.

"I think so;" but Susan did not look round.

"I wonder how he came here," said Helen.

"He won't travel as we do," observed Susan quickly.

"No;" Helen thought for a moment. "I am not sure, Susan, that we were wise in coming."

"Lady Augusta will be better when we are at rest again," said Susan; "when we get to Venice. The long journeys are too much for her."

"And the discomfort," said Helen. She looked round the room disconsolately. "I suppose Annette will be here presently; there are no bells."

"We may as well trust to her," said Susan; "we can do nothing;" and as she spoke a knock at the door was followed by the entrance of Annette, and the peasant girl who acted as chambermaid.

"Miladi waits tea," said Annette, reproachfully. "Sir Henry begs you to go, young ladies. Miss Graham! at your carpet bag! What's the use? You go. I see to all; only you be patient. Here,"—and she beckoned authoritatively to the girl, and touched the bed,—"*due—tu comprende,—zwei.*"

"And some water, Annette? can't we have a little water?" said Helen.

"Ah! dell' acqua, — wasser, — water; you fetch some." Annette pushed the chambermaid out of the room, and then followed to see that she obeyed orders.

"Annette is in her glory," said Helen; "she always is when every one else is in despair; why don't we fetch the water ourselves, Susan?"

"Because we don't know where to find it, I suppose," said Susan laughing. "And that ante-room, which they call a sitting-room, with all our doors opening into it, is like the sea; one is afraid to cross it, and explore the regions on the other side. How much water will they give us, I wonder! Our chambermaid looks as if she had never seen such an element."

Annette came back with a small basin, and a smaller jug, and one towel. "It was all they could have then," she said, in a threatening tone; "so they must be contented. If they would travel amongst *les rochers, les montagnes*, what could they expect? And poor Miladi! tired out; wanting her tea! They must go at once."

"'Beggars mustn't be choosers,'" said Susan. She took up one corner of the towel, and dipped it in the water, and gave another to her cousin. But Helen was thinking of something else, and let it fall.

"Mamma didn't ask for me after I left her, did she, Annette?"

"No, mademoiselle. Miladi only wants her tea;" and Annette opened the door into the ante-room, in spite of Helen's warning that she was not ready.

"She didn't say any thing about my having the other bed in her room, did she?" continued Helen.

"No, mademoiselle. Miladi said to me, 'Annette, you sleep there.' And I think it better. Miladi depends upon me."

Annette spoke proudly, conscious of her own importance.

"Please go and pour out the coffee, Susan; I am coming. Annette, you may wait to get the room ready."

The door closed, and when Helen was left alone, in the bare, uncarpeted, dreary chamber of the homely inn, she knelt by the side of the little pallet bed, and as tears coursed each other down her cheeks, prayed, as she had never prayed in her own splendidly furnished apartment at Ivors, that God would be pleased to pardon the many, many sins of her wilful youth, and permit her to atone to her father and her step-mother for the sorrow she had caused them, by the devotion of her future life.

That was Helen's constant prayer now. There was one thought ever in her mind; her faults, her follies, had been the indirect, though possibly not the immediate cause of the wreck of Lady Augusta's health, and of the powers of her mind.

Coffee, fresh eggs, an omelette, and some eatable bread! The

Stella d'Oro rose in Helen's estimation when she found that Lady Augusta could make a hearty meal; but it was only a sad pleasure, after all. Lady Augusta was like a child now. When her bodily comforts were attended to, she was satisfied to remain, without troubling herself either with the past or the future. She was irritable indeed when the next day's journey was mentioned. "If they were comfortable where they were," she said, "why should they not stay? The people were very civil, she did not like moving; now they were in Italy, they ought to be contented."

"Only near Italy, not quite in it, yet," said Helen, in a soothing tone. "We must pass Zuel first. That must be some miles beyond this. Besides, mamma, you know we want to reach Venice."

"You shall go about in a gondola then, my dear," said Sir Henry; "you will like that motion, it is so easy."

Lady Augusta only shook her head, and muttered something about not liking gondolas, and wishing to go to bed. Helen summoned Annette from the room, where she was employed in superintending the arrangement of a second bed and a washing-stand, and Lady Augusta departed; Helen following her to the door of her apartment, and begging to be allowed to help her, but receiving only an abrupt negative.

"Now for plans!" said Sir Henry, as he pushed aside his coffee cup, and referred to his constant friend, Murray. "It doesn't do to discuss them with your mamma, Helen. I can't make out at all where Pietro means to take us to-morrow. Belluno—that is out of our way; Santa Croce—'inn miserable;' Saravalle, Ceneda—too far; Longarone—'Post improved of late years;' that doesn't sound well; but it is the only thing within reach that I can see. I wonder,"—he started up, and then sat down again,— "If that were really Claude Egerton, he would be sure to know; but it couldn't have been, certainly it couldn't."

Susan answered without raising her eyes from the pocket-book, in which she was making a few pencil notes. "Isabella said in the letter which I had at Innsbruck, that Mr. Egerton had been at Wingfield, and that he was making particular inquiries as to our route."

"A man may do that without intending to follow it," said Sir Henry. "If we were in a civilised place, we might send and inquire for Claude at the Post, and the Aquila Nera. But these fellows talk such a jargon. And as to going oneself—" he drew

his chair nearer to the fire burning at the back of the stove ; — “ I declare it’s as cold as December, for all they call it Italy.”

He devoted himself again to the guide book. “ Helen, you are a good hand at reckoning distances ; just reckon these with me.”

Helen tried to follow where her father’s finger pointed, but she could not give her attention, and Sir Henry appealed to Susan.

“ I can’t think what has happened to you to-night, you seem both good for nothing. Bed is the best place for you after all. Why don’t you go ? We shall have to start early to-morrow.”

“ I can’t go till I am sure mamma is comfortable,” said Helen ; “ but that needn’t keep you, Susan. Papa, would it be really impossible to find out more about our journey to-morrow ? ”

Susan had closed her book, and lighted her candle, but she waited to hear the answer.

“ I don’t know who is to help us, unless it may be Claude,” said Sir Henry.

“ It will be very bad for mamma to have an uncertain distance,” continued Helen. “ The moment there is any doubt as to what is to be done, she becomes so nervous.”

“ Yes.” Sir Henry looked at his watch, then at the fire. “ It is late ; they will be gone to bed. I think we had better make inquiry the first thing in the morning. Pietro will go then, but he and his horses must be fast asleep by this time.”

Susan took up her candle, and said good night.

“ I shall come soon,” said Helen. How very tired you look, Susan ! ”

Susan only smiled. As she left the room, Sir Henry remarked : “ People used to say that Susan had even spirits ; I don’t think that is at all the case now.”

CHAPTER LXVII.

“ A GLORIOUS morning, Helen, and your mamma has had a good night, Annette says. We shall do famously now.” Sir Henry made his appearance in the ante-room at eight o’clock, rubbing his hands, and walked up to the window and back again to the door, and looked out into the passage to see if breakfast was coming. “ A glorious morning ! we ought to have been off, though, by this time. Not a place to stay in, this, in spite of your mamma’s wishes. A very shabby apology for a bed they gave me ; if I hadn’t been dead tired, I couldn’t possibly have slept. And for cleanliness—it’s best not inquire too minutely. What are you doing there, child ? ”

"Arranging some crochet work for mamma," said Helen. "When she stops in the middle of the day, she likes to have some work."

"Always thoughtful," said Sir Henry; and he patted her shoulder.

Tears rose in Helen's eyes.

"Not sad, my child, eh?" he continued. "We shall do very well again, depend upon it. Markham assured me that time and change were the only things wanted. And for other matters you know, Helen, I don't quarrel with you, whatever the rest of the world may do."

"It would not signify for the world," said Helen, "if I did not quarrel with myself."

"I don't see the cause you have," continued Sir Henry, a little impatiently. "Mordaunt was a scoundrel; one can't hide the fact. You had a full right to cast him off, and you weren't answerable for any consequences."

"I ought never to have cast him on," said Helen, attempting to answer her father in a tone as light as his own. "If I hadn't been led—but I don't excuse myself,—dear papa, please don't teach me to do so."

"That German woman was a desperate humbug!" said Sir Henry. "Ah, Helen! if I had a wish—but, however, you are free, I always told you so. By the by, I sent Pietro to the Post, and the Aquila Nera, this morning to inquire for Claude, but I couldn't find out anything. Three English gentlemen slept at the Post, but they were off at seven, and forgot to put their names in the book. If we do come up with him, it would be pleasant enough for me; but I don't know about you, child. What do you say?" Sir Henry put his hand under Helen's chin, and made her look at him.

"I suppose we should manage pretty well," was Helen's strained answer, and she turned away, and knocked at Lady Augusta's door.

Annette answered the knock. "Miladi is just ready; she comes to breakfast this instant! Ah! the coffee not up; stop, you go to Miladi, mademoiselle. The carpet bag is to be locked; then Pietro will come for it; are you ready? And Miss Graham:—you tell Miss Graham, she must not wait. Why don't they bring the coffee?"

Annette bustled herself out of the ante-room, catching up stray articles in her way, to be thrust into a certain bag kept for emergencies and last hopes, and Helen went to Lady Augusta.

"Papa says you slept well, dear mamma; I am so glad. Is

there any thing else to be put into the carpet-bag? Let me fasten your boot for you."

"Stop, Helen; the floor is so dirty; you must not kneel upon it;" and Lady Augusta laid her handkerchief on the ground. "Such a nasty place this is! I wonder why we came here; we would have paid handsomely for better rooms."

"We are going on to Venice, you know, mamma," said Helen; "we shall find beautiful hotels there, which once were palaces. You must come and have some breakfast, and then we shall start; and such a lovely day! You will like to have your breakfast," she repeated, trying to draw away Lady Augusta's attention from the little courtyard underneath the window, where Pietro, surrounded by peasants and ostlers, was employed in packing the carriage.

"I don't know the good of going to Venice; I sha'n't be better there. English people aren't wise to come abroad. Annette tells me that there are more English people here; she says that Claude has come after you, Helen. But it's no use for him; it's no use for any one. You never mean to please me."

"I would try to please you in any way I could, dear mamma." Helen spoke very calmly; she had been now too long accustomed to this kind of reproach to be shocked at it, and she took it as part of her punishment. "But you will come to breakfast; the coffee will be cold."

She led Lady Augusta into the ante-room, poured out her coffee, cut her roll in slices, and took care that there should be just enough chicken placed on her plate, and then Lady Augusta for the first time said, "Thank you;" and Helen sat down contented.

"The carriage is ready, Miladi. Sir Henry is waiting. Let me take the carriage bag. Mademoiselle, you carry the book. Miss Graham,—ah me! where is Miss Graham? Too tiresome! Miladi, you won't go alone? nobody else will put you comfortable. Miss Graham!" Annette rushed to Susan's door.

"Miss Graham is gone down," said Helen. "She is never late."

"Never! a long day!" Annette shrugged her shoulders. "But we come; we leave *ce vilain lieu*. *Ah les montagnes! que je les deteste!*" and she shook her hand at the window, in defiance of the green hills which looked down upon the little inn.

Sir Henry was examining the horses and talking to Pietro. Susan stood by him.

"Capo di Ponte, you say? I don't see it mentioned."

"Capo di Ponte; good beds at Capo di Ponte," said the landlord, proud of the first English words he had learnt.

"Who told you about Capo di Ponte, Pietro?" asked Susan.

Sir Henry turned round quickly. "You here, Susan! how you startled me! Better get into the carriage, child, and settle yourself."

But Susan lingered; Sir Henry was impatient. "I shall manage it all; don't be fidgety."

She could not help herself then; but she leaned out of the carriage to hear Pietro's answer.

"A man at the Post, who saw the English party off this morning," replied Pietro. "They don't go there themselves; they stop short at Longarone; but that makes to-morrow's journey too long."

"Yes, yes, I understand. We get to Treviso to-morrow. No chance of coming up with Claude Egerton then, if it should be he."

Susan put down her veil, and was so interested in observing Annette's final adjustment of boxes and carpet bags, that she averted her face completely from Lady Augusta and Helen, not even looking round, when Helen urged that they should change places, and asserted that the back seat, on such a fine day, could not make her uncomfortable.

There is a great charm, doubtless, in visiting a country long familiar to us by description, and which we have, as it were, made part of our own by experience; but there is a greater still in that which we know only by its place in the map, and the loveliness of which we discover, as for the first time, for ourselves. The mountains of Friuli around Tai de Cadore may, perhaps, bring to us but few associations; yet, if we have ever looked at the backgrounds of Titian's pictures, we may see the impression which they made upon a mighty genius, and may trace the scenes impressed upon his childish imagination, with all the brilliancy belonging to early age, and scarcely to be diminished, even when revisited in after years, and criticised by the sober judgment and with the careworn feeling of manhood.

For, in truth, it is a glorious country. Jagged mountains, their summits occasionally tipped with snow; lesser hills covered with wood, with here and there huge yellowish crags, giving a peculiar warmth of colouring to the scenery; deep rocky ravines; villages, and churches, dotted about on all sides; and the ruins of ancient castles, proudly looking down upon them from the projecting cliffs; and all felt, rather than seen, beneath the blue Italian sky, and under the soothing influence of the southern air! —it is a land to dream of. When it has passed, and memory recurs to it, it is with a strange, incredulous doubt whether the

eye, now profaned by common sights, can ever have been permitted to gaze upon such a vision of beauty.

Helen and Susan leaned over the carriage, drinking in with delight the views which every turn of the road brought before them, whilst even Lady Augusta was sometimes roused to observation, and owned that it was much warmer and pleasanter in Italy than in the Tyrol. They were descending into the valley at an easy pace, following the course of the little river Piave. Sir Henry having satisfied himself that it was a splendid country, was looking out for Perarollo, "'Inn fair,'" as he informed them, after due consultation with Murray. There they were to dine; there he hoped that they might get something fit for Lady Augusta to eat. "You needn't look scornful, Helen; rocks and mountains won't keep you alive. What does Pietro say, I wonder?" and touching Annette, who was seated on the carriage box, he told her to inquire how long it would be before they reached Perarollo.

"Un petit quart-d'heure, Sir Henry. Is Miladi tired;" was Annette's anxious reply.

"Trois quart-d'heures, you mean, Annette. Always multiply by three, when you are travelling. You have no biscuits with you, I suppose! Lady Augusta looks as if she would like something."

"*Des biscuits! non. Ce vilain pays!* Bread very bad; sandwiches never heard of; how do the people live. *Ah! quel costume!*" and forgetting Lady Augusta, Annette lifted up her hands in astonishment, as a peasant girl passed them, with the Tyrolean man's hat, a gown made of a blue bodice and red skirt, and wearing a silver necklace, with a cross depending from it.

"She is stopped to be drawn. *Ce sont des Anglais!*" called out Annette, in delight, looking back as the carriage went on. See, there are some gentlemen sketching. Look, mademoiselle, look."

Helen did not take the trouble to turn round, but Susan, from the back seat, did what she thought would please Annette, and bent forward.

"Did you see them, Susan!" asked Helen, laughing; "were they English wild animals?"

"They are gone now," said Susan; "or rather we are. Will you allow me to look at Murray?" she added, taking the book from its place by Sir Henry's side.

Susan was busy with the guide book for more than the "petit quart-d'heure" of which Annette had spoken; but just as they began to descend the wonderful zig-zag road which carries the

traveller from the Alpine scenery around Cadore into the picturesque little village of Perarollo, she gave it as the result of her researches, that if they had set off earlier and had chosen to stop on the road, they might have visited Pieve di Cadore, the birth-place of Titian.

"I suppose the people we passed had been doing that," said Helen.

A remark to which no reply was obtained.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

"Now, Susan, mamma is comfortable and Annette looking after her, shall we attempt a sketch?" said Helen. The first Italian dinner was concluded; and Lady Augusta, having acknowledged that certainly, though the place was so miserable and dirty, they did manage to send up things in a very different way from the Tyrol, had taken to her crochet, as Annette remarked, quite kindly, and would no doubt be willing to sit quiet till Pietro was ready.

They left the little inn, and strolled through the village, scattered at the foot of steep hills and affording scarcely any level ground except the high road.

"It is beyond sketching," said Susan, as she glanced at the wall of cliff by which they had descended into the village, and along the face of which the road could be traced in lines which seemed at a distance nearly horizontal.

"Cowardly, that is," exclaimed Helen. "If I don't please other people in sketching, I please myself, even if I can only make half-a-dozen strokes. Just see what a picture that would be, where the water is rushing from above, descending, one cannot see how, from the hills. The meeting of the Piave and — what is the other river?"

"The Boite. But they scarcely look like natural streams. They must have been pent up, I fancy, artificially, and are like foaming English mill streams. I suppose if one asked why it was done one should not comprehend the answer. Oh, dear! one's ignorance! Is there any thing like travelling to make one understand how great it is?"

"Natural or artificial," said Helen, in a determined tone, "I shall try it." And she seated herself upon a low wall by the side of the river, facing the mountainous zig-zag road and the ravine through which the water had forced its way as it descended from the hills.

"And I shall walk on a little further and see how the village looks from the heights," said Susan. "I can't sketch to-day."

The accent of her voice struck Helen; and she said, a little uneasily, "You are not well."

"Not so very, as people say. The carriage tires me, I shall be all the better for a walk; and I like to be alone, indeed I do: you know I am always honest."

"Yes, always," said Helen, heartily. "But, Susan, I think sometimes that in caring for mamma we don't care for you."

"I can care for myself," said Susan. "Besides, why should I be thought of more than you?"

"Because I have been thought of all my life," said Helen: "and it has spoilt me. That is not bitterness, but truth; and I am learning to bear it. Now go; if we begin talking I shall never sketch. Remember, we have only an hour."

Susan lingered for a moment, and then slowly pursued her solitary way.

Strange it seemed to herself that she should be so unchanged, so English still, so wrapt up in home and home feelings, in what almost seemed selfishness. Here in that remote village, hidden amongst the vast hills whose existence she had scarcely before realised, and with the scenes through which she had previously passed,—the Rhine and its bright beauty and historical associations,—Munich, with its glorious galleries of art,—Innsbruck, the city of the noble Peasant land, all fresh in her recollection, it seemed hard that she should still be the same. She had rested upon the hope that travelling would bring forgetfulness, though what she wished to forget she would not trust herself to acknowledge.

But even amidst the charms of that surpassing beauty, Susan felt herself to be living in the past. The bodily eye rested upon the mountains of Italy; but the eye of the mind, travelled back to the chamber of death, the stealthy footsteps, the hushed voices, the fervent prayer, the dying grasp which had joined her hand with Claude's, the voice that had whispered to him to be kind.

And he had been kind, to her mother, and Isabella, and Anna, to herself also in those first days of sorrow. But since then they had never met. Lady Augusta's illness had summoned Mrs. Graham and Susan to London; and Claude, though constant in his inquiries, had never appeared in Grosvenor Place. She would probably seldom see him again. He could not come to Ivors, and there was little to call him to Wingfield; and in London Susan would most likely be at Grosvenor Place, and Claude

would therefore never come in her way. They were separated by circumstances: it was the will of God, and doubtless it was well that it should be so.

It was foolish to think of him now, very unwise to dwell upon the distant probability that he had followed them abroad, and that they should meet. Certainly the voice they had heard was like his, the figure at the side of the road resembled him, but the last thing he would be likely to do would be to take their route, even if he were abroad; he evidently dreaded so much to meet Helen. If he had made the inquiries which Isabella mentioned, it must have been with the view of avoiding them.

And now—yes, the point was quite settled; a carriage was descending the hill, two gentlemen in it, a stout, elderly man, and a tall, slight youth; it must have been he that she had mistaken for Claude. Susan felt a sudden pang, then a great sense of relief. She stood upon a bank to escape the dust; the carriage drove past, the gentlemen looking at her curiously. When it was gone she did not feel any inclination to ascend the road higher, and, seeing a little mountain path leading to a cottage above the bank, she pursued it for some distance, and then sat down to rest.

Her mind was quieter now, more in its ordinary state; and she took out her sketch book ashamed of the indolence which had prevented her from using it before. But the situation which she had chosen was not favourable, and she moved on. A piece of rock close to her was inviting for a foreground; and passing round at the back, she came suddenly and unexpectedly in sight of Claude Egerton.

It could be no other than he. His back was towards her, he was drawing; but there was no mistaking him, he was the traveller whom she had seen by the roadside; he ought to have made the third in the carriage which had just driven by. She drew back behind the rock, her limbs trembling so that she could not stand; and seating herself on the ground she threw aside her sketch book, and thought—she knew not of what, only she seemed chained to the spot, and minutes appeared hours, as she expected every instant to see Claude descend the bank into the road, and pass away from her sight.

The rush of the brawling, mingling little rivers below deadened every other sound, so that Susan could not hear if Claude moved; and the rock was so situated that it was possible for him to go back to the road without her seeing him. The idea did not strike her for some seconds; when it did she instinctively altered

her position a few paces, and in doing so the sketch book fell out of her hand and rolled down the bank.

Claude saw it, hurried after it, and, looking round for the owner, confronted Susan. His start of surprise and pleasure told his tale instantly—the meeting was accidental. But he came up to her, his face radiant with delight.

“Miss Graham here! alone! how strange! how very satisfactory!”

“Not quite alone,” said Susan; and her face was crimsoned with a deep blush. “I have left the rest of the party in the village.”

“But you are alone for the moment. Stay, will you not?” As Susan moved down the bank, he stopped her. “I have so many things to say, and I so little expected this pleasure. I did not know you were in Italy.”

“We talked of Salzburg and Vienna, when we left home,” said Susan; “but it was Helen’s wish to see Italy.”

His face changed instantly. He said in an altered, quiet tone, “Is Helen — is Miss Clare well?”

“Pretty well, better than she was in London; but won’t you come?” Susan, in her agitation, forgot every thing but her wish to escape being alone with Claude.

“No; I can’t come. Wait, please; don’t leave me yet.” Claude stood still, and Susan was obliged to do the same. “Tell me about Lady Augusta.”

“I don’t know what to say. Her bodily health improves; but the mind is a wreck.”

“Such a shock! such a terrible shock for all!” he said, thoughtfully. “Can you enjoy yourselves? It is very splendid.” And he looked round at the mountains.

“We enjoy it immensely at times,” said Susan. “Perhaps we should enjoy it too much if we had no cares.”

“Yourself still,” he said, smiling. “It makes me almost a boy again. Are you staying here?”

“No; we are on our way to Venice.”

His face lighted up brilliantly; but a cloud soon came over it again. “Venice is our destination too; but I don’t know when we shall be there. I am under Captain Hume’s orders. You remember him; Sir John Hume’s brother. He has come abroad for his son’s health. Sir John and his family are at Venice; and we are to meet them there. Do you go on to Venice immediately?” he asked.

“I believe so; but Sir Henry will tell you every thing. He

will be terribly vexed if he doesn't see you. And we are intending to set off again directly."

"Like ourselves; strange that we should be travelling the same road. I can give you no news from home, I suppose; you must have heard since I left England. I was at Wingfield, and saw them all;— your mother, and Anna, and Isabella. Is that very impertinent?" he added, with a doubtful smile; "and, shall I confess? sometimes, when you are not present, I say, Susan."

"I like you to say it," replied Susan. She spoke the words eagerly, yet corrected herself directly, and added, with some stiffness, "I like you to do what is most pleasant to yourself."

He seemed thrown back for a moment, and answered, "Home ties and home friendships are strong in a foreign land; you must forgive me. Did you say that Sir Henry was to be found at the inn?"

"I think so; but I am not sure. We left him there. Helen and I came out together."

"Miss Clare is with you then?" He glanced round anxiously.

"She is sketching in the village. It is good for her to be away from Lady Augusta, when she can be; it is such a wearing life."

"And Helen waits upon Lady Augusta entirely, does she? I heard so in London."

"She would wait upon her more, if she were allowed," said Susan. "But Lady Augusta is very strange. No one but Annette knows how to manage her. It frets Helen," she continued; "she reproaches herself."

"I don't know why she should," he said, quietly.

"I ought to reproach myself, if any one does," said Susan. "But I don't," she added; "I feel I am not answerable for consequences if I did right." And she raised her eyes with confidence to Claude's face.

"You don't doubt it? you can't think any one would blame you for an instant," he exclaimed. "I for one, thank you from my heart."

His voice shook; and he hurried on a few paces before Susan, but turned to assist her down the bank.

"There is Helen," said Susan, "sitting on the little wall by the river. Don't you see her?"

Claude had observed her long before Susan pointed her out; but now, when his attention was drawn towards her, he seemed disinclined to go on.

"She has seen us," continued Susan. "Look, she is coming towards us."

Helen made a few steps to meet them, then turned and walked rapidly back to the inn.

"I see; it is as I feared. My presence is unwelcome," said Claude, rather bitterly.

"You must not judge her hardly," replied Susan. "It is only awkwardness."

"Of course, of course. But I don't wish to make her feel awkward. I trust to you; you will make Sir Henry understand why I did not wait. I trust entirely to you." He drew off his glove to shake hands; but just at that moment Sir Henry came up.

"Claude, my dear fellow!" Sir Henry grasped Claude's hand with both his. "Where in the world did you drop from, I should say, only I have heard all about you. I met Captain Hume and George.—How ill the boy looks! but this air is sure to do him good. So you are going on our road. Come in, we have just ten minutes before we start; Hume and his son said they were going to walk about a little before dinner, so they won't want you; and Lady Augusta and Helen——" Sir Henry checked the words which would naturally have followed, and added mournfully, "You will find Lady Augusta changed; but she will like to see an old friend."

"Are you sure I sha'n't intrude?" asked Claude, drawing back.

"Not a bit, man. Intrude! It will do her good. I told her you were here; and Helen said——"

"Did Miss Clare think it wise? I should fear it might do harm," continued Claude.

"Nonsense, my good fellow! I saw Helen a moment ago; and she said it was best to take all things naturally, and Helen knows best. She is devoted to Lady Augusta,—a pattern daughter, I must say that for her."

Sir Henry drew Claude into the passage of the inn, without allowing him time for any further excuses. He seemed in a nervous hurry to have the meeting over, and would not take Claude's suggestion that he should be announced before making his appearance in Lady Augusta's presence.

"Better not, much better not. She will only work herself up into an agitation. It will do all very well if it comes naturally, as Helen says." Sir Henry entered the room; and Claude stood at the entrance. Lady Augusta was sitting with her back to the door, looking out of the window; her crochet work lay in her lap; she had her hand upon it; and Helen was trying gently to disengage it from her, whilst Annette stood by threateningly, say-

ing that, if they did not start directly, it would be last night over again, they should not be in till dark. It was the old trouble ; where Lady Augusta was, there she chose to remain, at least whenever she was asked to go. There was the long indulged determination of her natural character, only now with very little reason to control it.

"Dear mamma, I think you will let me put up your crotchet," said Helen ; "it will be quite ready for you to begin again when we stop by and by."

"I don't wish to stop," began Lady Augusta ; but Sir Henry came forward, and his step made his wife start, and caused Helen to take her hand, and say soothingly, as she glanced at the door, "Here is papa come to tell us that we must go ; and he has brought Claude Egerton to see you for a minute ; he is travelling the same way that we are."

Her voice did not tremble in the least ; but Claude's was scarcely audible, as he obeyed a sign made by Sir Henry, and approached, and shook hands, first with Lady Augusta, then with Helen, and said to the latter, "I hope you are better than you were when I heard of you in London ?"

Lady Augusta appeared to have some difficulty at first in recognising him. Presently, however, a gleam of pleasure came over her face, and she said it was very kind of Claude ; he always was kind ; now he was come, she did not see why they might not all go back to England together.

Claude turned his head away ; for a tear dimmed his eye.

"It's a bad time of the day with her," whispered Sir Henry. "She was much better at starting. Augusta, my dear, you will like to think that we shall have a friend at Venice, when we get there."

"Are you coming with us ?" Lady Augusta for a moment spoke quite like herself ; and Helen looked up eagerly at Claude, but bent her head again as she caught his eye fixed upon her.

"You must promise to meet us again," said Sir Henry. "Any thing belonging to home does her good, though Markham declared change was the only thing needed. It is so, isn't it, Helen ?" he added, observing Claude's doubtful face.

And Helen answered, with sad composure, "I hope it may do good ; I think she likes it." She addressed herself again to Lady Augusta. "I think, mamma, you had better come into the next room, and put your bonnet and shawl on. Claude will not go till we return."

She appealed to Claude as she might have done in other days.

His thoughts were quite occupied with Lady Augusta. He answered directly, "No, indeed; we have to wait here more than half an hour longer to rest the horses."

"And Claude will meet us at Venice, my dear," continued Sir Henry. "You must," he added, as Lady Augusta at length unwillingly rose from her seat, and followed Helen's suggestion. "It was just the chance how she might receive you; but it does her good evidently. So we shall depend on you."

Claude's answer was unsatisfactory. "My movements depend upon others. It is possible Captain Hume may be summoned to Milan to meet a relation; if so, I shall probably go with him there, and then make my way back to Venice a week hence by another route. Whether we return to England by Austria or France is equally uncertain."

"The blessing of travelling like an independent gentleman, without incumbrance!" said Sir Henry, — and there was an accent of real sadness under his assumed cheerfulness. — "With three ladies one is under strict orders." He looked round. "What, Susan, here still! we seem to have quite forgotten you, child."

"Have you?" replied Susan; "it did not strike me." She was sitting down by the table, her bag and parasol in her hand, quite ready to go.

"Persons who are always remembering others must make up their minds to be often forgotten themselves," said Claude, with a smile. "I dare say you have never once been late during the whole journey."

"I have only myself to take care of," said Susan.

"Helen is very much improved in that respect, I must say," observed Sir Henry; "she makes a great effort, and then she is generally helping her mamma. I think, Susan, I had better go and see that the carriage is all right; and you can bring Lady Augusta down after me." Sir Henry, always restless when upon the point of starting, hurried down stairs.

Claude drew near to Susan when Sir Henry was gone. "Must I come to Venice?" he said; "you will tell me."

Susan answered hurriedly, "I don't know, — I can't say. Do you mean about Lady Augusta?"

"Yes; will it do her harm? I am sure you will judge better than Sir Henry."

"Helen will know best," said Susan, rising; "I will call her."

"No, no! I entreat you not." He put out his hand to detain her. "Excuse me, I would much rather trust to you. Can't you tell me?"

"It may be excitement," said Susan, coldly.

He looked exceedingly pained. "I was afraid so. Thank you, for telling me. I will take care, even if we should unfortunately be in Venice together."

"But I am not sure; I can't really say. If you would only let me ask Helen." Susan was evidently distressed at the strong effect of her words.

"No not on any account." He spoke almost impatiently, and added, "It has been a great pleasure, seeing you here. You don't know how I long for sights and faces akin to home. You won't think that weak," he added, with a marked emphasis; "you understand always."

Susan bent her head down and searched for something in her carriage-bag.

Claude waited for a moment, and, as he heard a hand laid on the handle of the door opening into the inner room, added, in a low voice, "One thing more you will tell me: Helen,—is she happy? that is, as she can be under such circumstances?"

"Happier than she ever was before," said Susan; "she is so good."

Helen came in; and Claude withdrew from Susan in evident embarrassment.

Lady Augusta looked more her former self in her travelling-dress; the bonnet-cap helped to fill up the hollows of her face, and made her appear less thin; and the shawl covered her tall, spare figure, now bent from illness. Claude gave her his arm to take her downstairs: and she went with him, talking all the way of their meeting, and urging him to join them at Venice: she was so eager, that it was almost impossible not to promise. Helen followed with Susan. As they stepped into the carriage, Helen offered her hand to Claude, and said, "Mamma wishes it; and we shall all be glad to see you."

There was very little constraint in her manner; but she did not speak to him again, though he stood by the carriage for several minutes whilst they were waiting for Pietro.

Susan had the last pressure of his hand, the last smile, and the last words, spoken in an under tone of friendly, almost affectionate confidence:—"Still I trust to you more than to any one else."

Lady Augusta was the only person inclined to talk for the next quarter of an hour. Helen answered her, but with an effort which any other person would have perceived. Sir Henry studied Murray, being determined, as he said, to get at Venice properly; and

Susan's eye followed the course of the Piave, as it made its way through the ravine which they had just entered, whilst a smile of peace rested upon her lips, which, to Helen at least, needed no explanation.

CHAPTER LXIX.

A VERY indifferent resting-place was Capo di Ponte, found after long and anxious expectation whether any such place were in existence. Moreover, the afternoon journey was by no means so interesting as that of the morning. The grandeur and beauty of the Friulian mountains was gone; and the road, after emerging from the ravine immediately beyond Perarollo, led into a broader valley, affording space for the Piave to spread itself out, and leave a rough shingly beach at its edge, which considerably injured its picturesqueness. Longarone, a bright-looking little village on the side of the river, might have been better chosen for the halting-place, if bodily comfort only had been consulted; but there were secret reasons against it in the minds of most of the party. Pietro thought of his horses, and the next day's journey to Treviso; Sir Henry disliked coming to a standstill early in the afternoon, unless there was something very remarkable to be seen; Annette dreaded the weary hours before bed-time, to be spent in attending to Lady Augusta, and helping her with her crochet; Helen remembered that Longarone would bring them again within reach of Claude Egerton; and Susan,—her feelings were a problem not so easily solved. And so Longarone was passed; and Pietro smacked his whip triumphantly, and drove on at a great pace, nodding, and smiling, and chattering to Annette with consummate *nonchalance*; taking care, however, to make excuse for stopping every now and then to make secret inquiries of the peasants; whilst poor Sir Henry,—his eyes fixed one moment upon the "Handbook," and the next raised doubtfully to look around him,—was heard to murmur to himself, "Very perplexing! very uncomfortable! not at all sure there is such a place! Very strange that Murray shouldn't mention it! I'll row that rascal Pietro well, if he has misled us."

But Capo di Ponte came at last,—a straggling village, only remarkable for a long wooden bridge over the Piave, ornamented by the Winged Lion of St. Mark; and so carrying the thoughts back to the days when Venetian power extended itself far beyond the limits of the city of the sea.

The poverty-stricken little inn was crowded by groups of Italian peasants, neither very clean nor very respectable-looking. Lady Augusta uttered a faint exclamation of terror, declaring that they were in the land of banditti, and had been brought there to be murdered; and insisted, as usual, that they should all go back to England. But the travelling-carriage, as it drew up before the door, had the effect of dispersing the crowd immediately around; and they withdrew to a convenient distance, watching, with marked interest, the proceedings of the strangers.

"*Uno, due, tre, quattro,*" exclaimed Annette, counting upon her fingers, as she made her way into the inn. "Where will they find so many rooms. *Ah! quel pays! quel pays!*"

But she was stopped by the smallest, briskest, blithest, most black-haired of Italian waiters, who showered upon her a volley of asseverations, promises, and ecstasies of all kinds. Rooms! they had any, all; an infinite number. Beds! ah! yes, superb. Supper! instantly; fresh eggs, fish, bread, meat, omelettes, *tutto, tutto, a suo servizio*; the lingering emphasis upon *tutto, tutto*, giving a depth of meaning which included what in London would certainly have been called every delicacy of the season.

"A salon! where is the salon, Annette?" asked Lady Augusta, reproachfully, as the little waiter threw open the door of a bedroom, and ushered them into a very moderate-sized apartment, with one large uncurtained bed in it.

"No salons here, Miladi," said Annette, gruffly; "they don't know what such things mean. Here;"—and she caught the man by the arm, and held him, whilst he stood like a bird upon the point of taking wing. "*Cenere,—vous comprenez,—cenere?*"

"*Ah! si;*" but the waiter stood still, his eyes opened to their fullest extent, with anxiety and eagerness.

"*Cenere!*" repeated Annette, angrily. "*Ah, qu'il est sot.*"

"*Cena, Annette!*" murmured Lady Augusta, in a faint voice, and she sank down in a chair by the bed; and the little waiter uttered an exclamation of delight, and rushed to the door as if he had been shot.

"*Cena! cenere!*" muttered Annette to herself. "*Cenere! cena! quelle langue. Pauvre Miladi.*"

"Not in this room, Annette," almost screamed Lady Augusta; "tell him it mustn't be here.

"*Pauvre Miladi!* we shall do quite well." "Mademoiselle, Miss Graham;" Annette addressed Helen and Susan, who had just followed her into the room; "You go out with Sir Henry; take him out; let him have a walk. Miladi and I, we arrange every

thing; *allez, allez*,"—and in a moment she was fiercely confronting the waiter. "*Wir müssen*: ah, why do we go through so many countries to talk so many languages. *Voyez vous*; — *bisogna vedere*—what must I say, mademoiselle? I forget. How call they landlady here?"

"There is no occasion to call her," said Susan; "here she is. Now you can arrange every thing."

"*Ah! oui, oui*; then you go." Annette drew forth a little Italian vocabulary, which she had been carefully studying during the journey.

"You had much better let us talk to her," said Helen. "You will be sure to blunder."

"Blunder! did I ever blunder yet? Then you take it your own way; see how you manage. I give it up; I leave it." Annette shrugged her shoulders, and scowled defiance.

"A Roman dictatorship was nothing to this," said Helen, aside to Susan; "I am only thankful that we left our courier at Innsbruck; we shouldn't have been allowed to choose our own road, if we had not. But I can't leave mamma in this way, to the mercies of Annette's Italian. Just go out with papa, and let me stay."

"Sir Henry will be disappointed," said Susan.

"That can't be helped. I don't mean to be undutiful; only go—occupy him in some way, or he will be miserable."

Susan went down stairs, and found Sir Henry talking over the prospects of the next day with Pietro. Susan's suggestion that they should see what the place was like was just the thing he wanted, and they went out together.

A scramble over the rough stones, which formed the shore of the river, and which spread out on either side so as to form a very desolate and uninteresting feature in the scenery, was occupation to Sir Henry for the next three quarters of an hour; and then being sufficiently tired, he proposed returning to the inn. Susan was only too glad not to have had a long *tête-à-tête* walk. Conversation with her uncle was generally painful, for he was always asking her what she thought of Lady Augusta, and she was obliged to disappoint him by confessing that she saw but very little, if any, improvement. This day, however, Sir Henry chose another topic, in the short distance which they walked along the road, as they came back from the river. He spoke of Claude Egerton, and regretted openly that Helen had not been able to like him. "Claude may not be such an attractive man to a young girl as many persons of his age are," he said; "there is a certain stiffness and

coldness about him, a want of sunshine; but that is all to be attributed to his early life; he knew sorrow just when most boys knew joy, and he has never recovered it. A happy marriage would make him quite another man; and then he is such a first-rate fellow! Hume was talking to me about him when we met; telling me all he has been doing at Helmsley. He has been down there staying with him. There is not a cottage on the estate which Claude hasn't repaired, or added to; not a labourer that he doesn't know, if not personally, at least sufficiently to look after his family, and take care that there is no want. Certainly, he has a capital agent on the spot, but he is down there continually, seeing after things himself, and working like a dray horse in Parliament besides. Where is there another man of Claude's age, and with his fortune, who would give himself up to work in that way? And yet you women can't like him, because he doesn't play the flute, and dance the polka, and won't sport a moustache. Ah! Susan, you are a very perplexing race."

"Very," said Susan; it was the only reply required of her, for they had reached the door of the inn, and Sir Henry hurried away from her, to see what progress had been made, in providing for Lady Augusta's comfort.

"Odd this! but not to be despised, eh, my dear?" was his cheerful observation to his wife, as he sat down at a square table, placed between the bed and the side wall of Lady Augusta's apartment.

"I don't see why they don't treat us better," said Lady Augusta. "Annette wouldn't ask for a salon, though I told her what to say."

"Something new and pleasant enough once in a way," continued Sir Henry. "What are they going to give us, Helen?"

"Fish, and soup, and an omelette," said Helen. "I was afraid of trusting too much to tea and coffee."

"Very good; we shall do capitally. What have you been doing with yourself, my dear?"

"I have been reading to mamma," said Helen.

"Yes; Helen reads to me sometimes. I like that," said Lady Augusta. "We had not quite finished."

"I was reading the Psalms for the day," said Helen with an air of apology. "It soothes her," she added in an under-tone.

Sir Henry looked as if he thought it rather a strange and inconvenient time to choose for reading the Psalms, but in his good-nature he would not interfere. Helen went on reading; Lady Augusta listening, with her eyes closed, and Sir Henry

striving to be reverent and attentive, though showing his restlessness by an impatient movement of his foot. He started up as Helen shut the book. "Now then for supper! *Cenere*, as Annette calls it; what a capital blunder! Are we to have a tablecloth, I wonder. *Garçon!*" He went to the door and called, and was answered by the black-haired waiter.

"*Ah! sì, signor; un momento.*" The little man skipped into the room with a cloth over his arm, which he spread upon the table, puckering it into ornamental figures; then, after disappearing, he danced up to the table again with some bottles, placing green leaves in them for stoppers; and at length, with an air of ineffable satisfaction, and looking round upon the party with the evident inquiry whether any thing could possibly be more perfect, he laid before Sir Henry a dish of fish, name and species unknown.

"Now, my dear." Sir Henry put some on the plate before him, looked at it doubtfully, turned it over. "Will it do, Helen? I am afraid not." His usual expression of good-humoured contentment deserted him for the instant. He pushed it aside, pointed it out with an air of scorn to the little waiter, and in the best Italian he could collect thundered out, "*Via, via, male!*"

"*Sì, signor, sì. Grazia, signor;*" and the condemned fish was seized and carried off with the merriest of steps and the most civil of smiles.

Helen and Susan laughed heartily. Lady Augusta inquired mournfully why they did not give them something to eat, she was very hungry, and they had all to go to bed, and this was her bedroom; she could not think why Annette would not ask for a salon; she was quite sure they would be much better in England.

The waiter reappeared with something supposed to be an omelette, but which in reality looked very much more like what in England is called Yorkshire pudding. It was eatable, however, and so was the soup; and Lady Augusta, who was the person chiefly to be considered, contrived to make a tolerable repast, which, however, was no sooner ended, than she insisted upon it she must go to bed directly; and her apartment being the only sitting room, every one else was obliged to follow her example.

CHAPTER LXX.

SUSAN and Helen occupied, as usual, the same room. A little trial it was to both; friends though they were from childhood, and intimately acquainted with each other's habits and modes of thought, there was something very wearing in never being alone. This evening Susan felt it more especially. Helen was inclined to sit up and talk; the very way in which she laid her candlestick upon the dressing-table and leisurely took out her journal was enough to prove it. Susan longed to be in bed, not that she might sleep, only that she might be quiet, still, to herself, — that she might think. The day had been singularly long and exhausting; she felt as though months had been condensed into it. It seemed scarcely possible that she had parted from Claude only a few hours before, and that he was even then but a few miles distant from her; and still less possible that they might meet at Venice. That, however, was doubtful. Again and again during the course of the afternoon she had said to herself that she would not think of it, she would not think of Claude at all; — whilst the next moment found her recalling his looks, tone, manner, words, dwelling upon the peculiar marks of interest he had shown, and the undisguised pleasure he had evinced in meeting her.

Could it all be vanity? petty, womanish vanity? Susan perhaps was as free from that great weakness as any person of her age and sex, but she could discover it in herself when others would never have noticed it; and now she blamed herself for it, and felt humbled in her own sight. But the suspicion of a fault could not, as at other times, enable her to subdue it; and worn with the constantly recurring feeling which she could not conquer, it was a relief, even though for the moment she felt it to be an interruption and annoyance, to be addressed by Helen with the matter-of-fact inquiry, — "What time are we to start to-morrow?"

"Half-past eight, as usual, I believe," answered Susan. "At least, I heard Pietro say so to my uncle."

"Two more days and then we rest," said Helen. "We could not go on much longer in this way."

"Lady Augusta would be over-tired, I am afraid," said Susan.

"Tired and excited," said Helen; "I dread that the most. I am sure those London doctors were wrong; I could have managed her better if they would only have listened to me."

"I doubt," said Susan. "I am sure change was the thing

needed, even though it may be an exertion at the time, and Lady Augusta may dislike it. You will find the benefit when you are at home again. It breaks up old habits."

"Yes," said Helen, thoughtfully, "if that be good; but I doubt it. Perhaps I am selfish, though; I could have done something for her in England, and I can do nothing here; Annette takes every thing from me."

"You do all you can," said Susan, kindly.

Helen smiled, though with a bitter sadness in her expression. "Yes, I do all I can, and what is it? I read the Psalms to her sometimes, and put her cushions right, and the chances are that she makes Annette alter them directly afterwards."

"But if it is not given you to do more, shouldn't you be satisfied?" asked Susan.

Helen laid down her pen and sighed. "You don't understand, Susan: I suppose it is not possible you could. If I were a Romanist, I could wear out my life with penances. I should like to do so now. I can understand their feeling, quite; any thing to get rid of the perpetual fret of one's conscience."

"But, Helen," exclaimed Susan, eagerly; "Sir Henry,—mamma,—every one tells you that you are not answerable."

"I know it," said Helen, coolly. "I am not idiot enough to suppose that I alone was the cause of that miserable fever. Perhaps—very likely, indeed—it would have been just the same if I had never come in the way. But it is no use arguing against feeling, Susan; most especially there is none in trying to persuade one, one is an angel, when conscience says just the reverse. Whom have I ever come in contact with that I have not made wretched? Who is there in the world that has to thank me for an hour's happiness? Nay, let me speak, I know beforehand all you would say. You think that being sorry does away with it all; but I am not sorry, at least not in the way you mean. I am not at all what people would call converted."

"You are altered," said Susan, "whatever you may choose to call it."

"I should be insane if I were not. Persons can't have such a shock as I have had without being so. If it were only having one's eyes opened to deceit where one imagined truth,"—and Helen's voice faltered as she thought of Madame Reinhard,—
"one must view the world differently in consequence. But that is not being religious. It is not really loving and caring for religion; a heathen might feel as I feel."

"But if he did, he would be on the high road towards becoming a Christian," said Susan.

"On the high road, possibly." Helen considered a little. "It does not follow that he might not wander out of it again. I don't feel in the least sure that I should not go back to my old ways if temptation came in my path. I don't know what is to keep me."

"Gratitude," said Susan; "the feeling that you were stopped and warned."

"If I could feel it," replied Helen; "but I don't. I hate myself, that is all."

"So we must all hate ourselves, I suppose," said Susan.

"Your hatred is a different feeling from mine though," continued Helen. "I am so angry with myself for having been taken in; that is one thing I can't get over; but there is no great virtue in it. And as to poor mamma,—I know I was a wretch; I teased and tormented her; and I would do any thing in the world to help her now: but that is merely the longing to satisfy my own mind."

"I wish you would give up analysing your feelings," said Susan; "you would be much better and happier."

"I should be thankful if I could," said Helen; "but I am a puzzle to myself; and I see clearly what every one about me thinks, and I know it is not true. People fancy I have become quite good and religious; but if it were not for you, Susan, and just one or two others, I suspect I should very often have no faith in goodness at all."

Susan showed by her countenance that she was shocked, but she would not say so. Helen went on in a wild, eager way, giving vent to the thoughts which oppressed her. "Teaching does nothing, Susan; practice is every thing; and all the practice I have seen, except yours, and Aunt Fanny's, and — and — Claude's, —" she paused, and Susan listened more attentively, — "it has all been pretence, — all that church-going and formalism. Madame Reinhard taught me to see that, if she taught me nothing else."

"But Madame Reinhard could not understand it," exclaimed Susan.

"Yes, indeed; she may have been false in her conduct, but her intellect was as clear and piercing as the sun."

"Intellect has nothing to do with the matter," said Susan. "It is a spiritual insight which is required to discern spiritual truths. I don't mean to talk cant, but it is the only way I can express myself. An irreligious person cannot possibly comprehend the use or comfort of religious practices."

"Madame Reinhard may have been very deceptive," said Helen, "but I am convinced she had a great deal of devotional feeling."

"Only it did not embody itself in deeds," said Susan; "and what was it worth?"

"I can't say; I don't know what any thing is worth," said Helen, despairingly.

"It is all worth nothing, dearest," replied Susan, as she drew near to her cousin, and laid her hand fondly upon her shoulder. "I quite agree with you that all the church-going and formalism, as you call it, are, in themselves, just as good for nothing as Madame Reinhard's devotion, and just as incomprehensible; but I would not for that reason cast them aside, any more than I would cry down religious feelings. It is absurd to talk of either as religion; but they may be great helps; they are means to an end. Like crutches, they are not the power of motion; yet, if the leg is weak, the power will not be sufficient without the crutches."

"People think they are more than crutches," said Helen. "Poor mamma piqued herself upon her church-going, as if it had embodied all the cardinal virtues; and I should soon fall into the same tone of mind myself,—I know I should. I can't be happy unless I have done a certain set of things for mamma in the course of the day,—looking after her crochet—preparing her breakfast,—all those little matters; but I am not one whit more kind and dutiful, really."

"But if you knew that Lady Augusta loved you very much, that would make a difference," said Susan.

"Yes, an immense difference,"—and Helen's eyes sparkled; "but she can't do that: I have been such a trouble to her."

"I suppose, if we believe the Bible, we must believe also that God loves us," said Susan, "in spite of our being what you call a trouble."

"I can't believe it," said Helen.

"But you can believe that He is more pleased with you when you try to do what is right than when you wilfully do wrong," said Susan.

"Yes, I suppose I can; I must." Helen spoke doubtfully.

"That will help you in a degree," said Susan; "it will take away the hard feeling from your duties."

"If it were not for all those mazes, those dreamy notions of Madame Reinhard's!" said Helen; "I used to think at the time that I did not care for them; but they return now, whenever

any thing like comfort comes to me, and throw me into such a whirl of doubt ! and then I think, and think, till I am half wild."

"Thinking won't help you," said Susan.

"I know that; nothing will, unless——Susan, I wish you would tell me about yourself; I should understand then."

"I can't talk of myself," was Susan's reply; and she turned away, and walked to the other end of the room. In another moment, however, she came back again, and said, "I don't mean to be unkind, Helen; but it is so different with me from what it is with you; and I have never been accustomed to analyse my own feelings. I don't know quite what I feel, or why I do things; only"—and her voice trembled—"I think I know what it is to love." After an instant she went on more composedly. "I can't tell how that feeling grew up. You know religion has always been part of our lives; it was mixed up with our idea of mamma: when we loved her, we could not help loving what she did; and so it came to us without any effort; and what you call formalisms were as natural to us as getting up in the morning, and going to bed, and eating and drinking. Perhaps the first thing that presented itself to me distinctly, as a feeling of religion, was that one which I mentioned just now,—I mean, that God would be pleased with me if I tried to do right. I had it when I was a very little child, even before I could understand all that has been done for us. It was the first thought that came home to me personally, and that, I dare say, is the reason why I dwell so much upon it. Of course people may say that it is not the ground of our love, and I know it is not; but I am sure, as regards myself, that it was a long time before I could realise the higher feeling of love to our Saviour for His sufferings,—that grows deeper and clearer as one goes on; but at first it is very difficult to enter into it."

"Very," said Helen.

"I dare say the fact is," continued Susan, "that religion comes to people in different ways, according to their different circumstances: in one way to a child, and in another to a grown-up person. I always feel as if my religion was that of a child; it is so much quieter than what I have heard of in persons who have been, what is called, converted late in life. But I should not like to change,—I mean, it would not suit me."

"Quietness is what I like," said Helen. "The odd ways people have of being religious, disturb me."

"We must take people as they are," said Susan; "we can be no more alike in our religious tastes, I suppose, than we are in

any other; but I am glad to put all external differences aside, and think of what persons are underneath. If they are in earnest, I can like and esteem them, in spite of their peculiar ways."

"Yes, if they are in earnest," said Helen; "but that is what I am always doubting."

"Well, suppose we don't think about others, but about ourselves."

"About myself," said Helen: "that is the point. What is to help me to be any thing but a cold-hearted wretch?"

Susan kissed her, and answered, "The knowledge that you are not one; that God does not look upon you as one, any more than I do; that He has made you very sorry for any thing that may have been wrong before, and given you a hearty wish to do right now."

"I don't know; I can't say that I am very sorry, or that I have a hearty wish," said Helen.

"But, without saying it, only go on trying to please God, because He made you His child at your baptism; and though you may have been a very naughty child, you wish now to be a very good one."

"And think that He loves me in spite of it all," said Helen; "that is harder than any thing."

"You don't like having texts quoted," said Susan; "but I may just show you one;" and she turned to her Bible, and pointed to the eighth verse of the fifth chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans: "'God commendeth His love towards us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.' There is nothing to be said against that argument."

"No," said Helen, thoughtfully. She took the Bible from Susan's hand and stood for some seconds reading it. Then laying it down suddenly, she exclaimed, in her usual light tone, "Susan, do you know where we are?"

"In Italy," said Susan.

"Capo di Ponte; a little out-of-the-way village in Friuli. I don't quite believe it."

"One carries oneself every where," said Susan, with a sigh.

"People think that when they travel they shall forget their former selves," said Helen; "but they don't, at least I don't. The surface may change, but the substratum is the same. It is very odd, though, that you and I should choose to talk on these grave matters, at Capo di Ponte."

"Very odd!" said Susan; "only Capo di Ponte is on earth, and whilst we live on earth I suppose we must perplex ourselves about matters of earthly conduct."

"Somehow, I never realised before that Italy was earth," said Helen. "But good-night; I am not going to talk any more."

Helen fell asleep quickly. Susan had a long, restless, wakeful night, full of dreams of Claude Egerton; but there was no longer the dread that her dreams were wicked.

CHAPTER LXXI.

"TREVISO to-day, Venice to-morrow, Susan," exclaimed Helen, as she stood by the side of her cousin's bed, at six o'clock in the morning.

Susan half opened her very drowsy eyes.

"Very comfortable beds, in spite of our chamber-maid's apology," continued Helen. "Did you hear her say last night that they had not been accustomed to wait upon ladies?"

"I don't remember any thing now," said Susan; "only that I should like to go to sleep again for another hour."

"Here comes Annette, to frighten us," said Helen; "you had better get up directly, Susan, or you will have a lecture."

Annette entered as brisk as though she had condensed two nights' rest into one. "Miladi much better this morning, wishing to set off very early. *Depêchez vous, mademoiselle.* Sir Henry moves about already. Miss Graham! you have not a moment."

"Well, then, just leave poor Miss Graham to herself, and come to me, Annette," said Helen. "What kind of night has mamma had?"

Annette's attention was happily withdrawn from Susan, who was left at liberty to dress; but quietness was not to be had. Helen required her services, and talk she would and must, about all things, and all places, and people; most especially, this morning, about Mr. Egerton. She had learnt more about him than he had told of himself. Captain Hume's man-servant had gossiped a good deal. "Mr. Egerton," she said, "had settled to go abroad quite suddenly. He had been overworking himself, and wanted change, and his spirits were not good. He was exceedingly kind to Captain Hume's invalid son, who had taken a great fancy to him, and that was one reason of his coming. Just before he left England there was a report that Mr. Egerton was going to be married, but Captain Hume's man didn't believe it." Annette was stopped short in the middle of her communication by an ex-

clamoration from Helen, that a hair-pin was running into her head.

"That will do, Annette; thank you; now you may go. Mamma will be waiting for you."

"Miss Graham, you want help. What can I do?" said Annette, advancing to the corner to which Susan had retired.

"Nothing, thank you, nothing." Susan's tone bordered upon irritation.

"*Pardon, pardon*, only you be ready in time. Miladi is very much disturbed when she is kept; and Sir Henry, he does not like it. Shall I put these shoes in your carpet-bag?"

"Thank you, no. I can do it all myself. I don't want any help; I can do quite well," persisted Susan, retiring further in the corner.

"Young ladies like their own way, but you be ready, mind Mademoiselle,"—she turned to Helen,—“where is your dressing-case? I put it up, and take it separate to Pietro. Mr. Egerton's carriage is a better one than ours; he puts things all comfortable. See,” and she stood deliberately by the little dressing-table—“let this be the carriage; there is a pocket here, a pocket there —”

Susan sat down, her hands on her lap.

"Annette, Annette, go!" exclaimed Helen, and she burst into a fit of laughter; "you will drive poor Miss Graham out of her senses."

"*Moi! qu'ai je fait? pourquoi?* You much better let me do your hair;" and she advanced again to Susan.

"Thank you, no, not on any account;" and Susan raised her hands to her head, to keep off the proposed assistance.

A thundering knock was heard at the door, and Sir Henry's voice, "Helen, Susan, why do you keep Annette? Lady Augusta wants her."

"*Ah! pauvre Miladi!*" Annette hurried out of the room, and Helen turned to Susan. "An enemy for life, Susan. She will forgive you any thing but getting up into the corner in that fashion, and refusing to talk to her."

"I must run the risk," replied Susan. "It does try one beyond patience to have that French chattering going on the first thing in the morning."

"And such things as she tells!" said Helen. "I wish —" she stopped herself.

"What do you wish?"

"Nothing, nothing. I don't think, any more than Captain Hume's man-servant, that Claude Egerton is going to be married;"

and almost involuntarily, Helen bent down and kissed her cousin's forehead.

They finished dressing in silence. Helen went to make breakfast. Susan remained to pack the carpet-bag, and was just collecting the few things to be put into it, when the door opened suddenly, and in rushed the black-haired waiter, with a grimace and a smile. *Perdoni, signorina, perdoni;* he made his way past Susan, unfastened a cupboard, caught up some wine-glasses, and was gone before Susan had time to laugh. Annette followed. "Ah! you so late! no wonder the garçon should come in. What can you expect?" She motioned Susan, with an air of offended majesty, to leave the carpet-bag, and would accept no apology for trouble. "Miladi ready, Sir Henry ready, and every one; only Miss Graham, she will always be last;" and the assertion was made so authoritatively, that poor Susan began to believe it must be true.

Straight level roads, bordered by acacias, gently rounded hills, and luxuriant vineyards, form a very agreeable country for a rapid and easy drive, but they are not very interesting nor picturesque. Lady Augusta and Annette were the only persons of the party who seemed to enjoy the change from the mountains. Helen complained openly, and was only comforted by the deliciously clear warmth of the climate. She would scarcely, indeed, acknowledge that there was any interest in the tiny lakes of Santa Croce, and the Lago Morto; the latter a most singular little sheet of water, shut in by high cliffs, and so still, as fully to deserve its name; and was only roused to excitement when they entered Sarravalle, the first Italian town which they had reached. Here, indeed, infinite amusement was to be found in the streets, which, from its being a festival day, were full of people. The quaint costumes, painted houses, arcades, and innumerable fruit stalls, made a mixture of gaiety and business, which seemed to please even Lady Augusta, and Sir Henry rubbed his hands with genuine satisfaction, as he muttered to Susan: "It will do after all; Markham was right. Italy is the place. I begin to say with Annette: *les montagnes et les vilains rochers, que je les deteste!*"

"We are to dine at Conegliano, I believe, papa, aren't we?" said Helen.

Sir Henry had recourse to Murray. "'Conegliano,—plains of the Piave,—Post, as usual,—frescoes by Pordenone, on private houses. Altar-piece in the Duomo, by Cima, cracked, blackened, and ruined.' Great comfort that! for we needn't trouble ourselves to go and look at it."

"I think I could walk a little, and go to the shops," said Lady Augusta, speaking with some energy. "Annette would go with me."

"I would go—we would all go, mamma," exclaimed Helen, and her face lighted up with a smile of relief and satisfaction, but disappointment followed almost instantly. Lady Augusta said decidedly, she did not want any one but Annette, and Helen sank back in the corner of the carriage, and did not speak again till they entered Conegliano.

"As good as Saravalle, I declare," said Sir Henry. "Look, my dear;" and he drew Lady Augusta's attention to the arcades and fruit-stalls. "We will just order dinner, and then you and Annette can walk about a little, and if you like buy us some figs to carry on with us this afternoon. Helen, and Susan and I, will go further to see what the place is like."

Lady Augusta seemed pleased at the idea of a commission, and Sir Henry handed her out of the carriage, and called to Annette to take care of her, and hurried into the hotel, to inquire about a salon and order dinner.

Helen lingered sadly behind. "It is no use," she said to Susan; "I may as well give it up. Even papa won't acknowledge that I can do any thing for her."

"I should persevere," said Susan; "things may change by and by; one never knows; and I would not let Annette take the upper hand. Now, I would insist upon seeing that the salon is comfortable, and that Lady Augusta rests for a few minutes before going out."

Susan turned round, and saw Annette close behind her. She had left Lady Augusta in the salon, and was returned to look after a bag that was wanted.

Her countenance was any thing but amiable. "Mademoiselle, Miss Graham, Sir Henry will be coming down directly. Miladi goes out with me; she is quite comfortable, quite." Annette placed herself in the way, so as almost to prevent Helen from passing.

"Thank you, Annette; I wish to go to the salon, myself, and see how mamma is," was Helen's resolute answer; and Annette drew back, murmuring to herself, and casting threatening glances at Susan, as she followed her cousin up the stairs.

Lady Augusta, changeable as the wind, had given up her momentary wish to walk, and was willing now to sit by the window, and look out into the streets. "She liked Conegliano," she said; "there was something going on to amuse her. She did not want her crochet."

"And if you and I stay here together, mamma," said Helen, "papa and Susan can take their walk, and Annette can go out and buy the fruit."

"No reason for that, my dear," said Sir Henry; "you will miss a good deal; there's an upper town to be seen, a curious place enough, from what I can make out. You had better come with us, and leave your mamma. Annette understands her better than you do."

"Annette must go and get the fruit," said Lady Augusta, a little petulantly. "If Helen likes to stay, she can."

"Like it!" muttered Sir Henry, "she doesn't like it, but she's always sacrificing herself." He was evidently disconcerted.

"You won't be gone long, I hope," continued Lady Augusta. "Dinner will be ready. I think you had better all wait till afterwards."

Sir Henry appealed to Susan. "We had better be off, Susan. If we wait, we shan't go at all. Helen, I can't let this kind of thing go on."

But Helen was contented, and a smile passed over her features, as she nodded to her father and cousin, and said, "Good bye for the present; you must tell me all you see." Susan was satisfied then that the choice was an honest one.

CHAPTER LXXII.

SIR HENRY and Susan wandered leisurely up a steep hill to the upper town, the original Conegliano, enclosed within walls, and containing the Duomo, and a castle. The picturesqueness of the place was to be found here, the ornamental stone-work of the old houses, and the half-defaced frescoes with which they were ornamented, giving an air of quaintness, and beauty of colouring to the narrow streets. Susan longed to stop and sketch every instant, and Sir Henry was loud and constant in his regrets that he had been foolish enough to give in to Helen's whim, and had not insisted upon her accompanying them.

"These old towns of northern Italy are singularly beautiful, Susan; we shan't see their like elsewhere, and Helen may never have the opportunity of coming abroad again. She will be married, I dare say, before long, and then there will be claims enough to keep her in England. See the world while you are young, for

you may never live to be old, is the wise motto. I wish I had insisted. I wish to my heart I had. Just look across to the opposite side, now; where will you see anything like that carved stone-work? and the arcades below, I wonder whether Lady Augusta would have come if I had suggested it; we could have driven up." Sir Henry was becoming quite excited, wandering along, and dragging Susan with him, in spite of her entreaties to be allowed to stop.

"No time, my dear, no time; dinner will be ready. We must look into the Duomo, just to say we have seen it. Here's a curious place!" and he peeped into a large court-yard, partially filled with tubs and carts, but bearing traces of exquisite ornament in the stone-work of the side walls and the roof.

"The hall of a house it must have been," continued Sir Henry. He made his way in, and Susan followed, a little frightened at the thought of trespassing, but considerably interested.

"Yes, the hall of a house, and now used as a warehouse; and look, there are some steps leading to upper rooms. But we mustn't stay—we have no time. On to the Duomo, Susan."

"I don't care for the Duomo," replied Susan. "Murray would have told us if there had been anything worth seeing there. I would much rather stay and sketch some little bits of this carving, if I might. I am sure I should find some which would do."

"You can't stay alone," said Sir Henry.

"Oh! yes, here; no one will see me. Please let me stay, and you can just walk on to the Duomo, and come back, and tell me whether there is anything worth seeing in it. It is quite close."

Sir Henry hesitated, went out into the street to be quite sure that the Duomo really was very close, came back again, and found Susan already prepared with her sketch book and pencil; and telling her he gave her only five minutes, left her alone.

But it was not so easy as Susan had expected to find what would do for sketching, and especially as she wished to place herself so that she might be screened from the observation of any one in the street. She examined the building more carefully. From the outer court there was an opening into another, heaped up with dirt and rubbish, yet having a beautiful carved and covered gallery built round it, and broken stone statues lying on the ground. The place must once, she saw, have been of considerable grandeur; perhaps it was a palace. Her attention was directed again to the flight of steps in the outer court, and a longing seized her to explore the rooms to which they led. She stood hesitating whether she should venture, and afraid of being missed by Sir Henry,

when the sound of loud English voices disturbed her. It was a curious feeling, which made her much more nervous than if they had been Italian. English people, unless they are previously acquainted, have an instinctive dislike to meeting each other abroad; and when the party entered the court, Susan, not very wisely, hurried up the stairs. They terminated in a passage, the floor of which looked like marble, and passing along this she found herself in a large, and what must once have been a very handsome room, hung with tattered paintings of men in armour, princes and nobles, with their titles written beneath, but bearing names unknown in the marked events of general history. Great and powerful, however, they must doubtless have been in their day; each grim, torn portrait having its tale of earthly distinction, now past and forgotten; whilst the phantom forms connected with them stood forth mockingly in their own halls, preaching eloquently of the nothingness of human greatness, by the very means intended to perpetuate its memory.

It was a startling sensation which came upon Susan, when she entered thus, unannounced, into the presence of these forgotten nobles. The first emotion was awe, the second, shame at having intruded; she looked round for some one to whom she might apologise; but she was alone with the silent figures. Without, in the street, there was life, and mirth, and business; below, she could catch the sound of men's voices, speculating and curious, doubtless, like herself; but there was no one to tell her where she was or with whom. The hall was the only part of the palace apparently remaining, with the exception of one small room beyond, the ceiling of which was painted. She was lingering in the hall, feeling unwilling to leave it, and looking upon it as a discovered treasure of her own, when the English voices were heard at the foot of the steps. Susan might have been uncomfortable, but that the first which was recognised was that of Sir Henry Clare.

"Up here, Hume. Where won't a woman's curiosity lead her? Susan, child." Susan, rather ashamed of herself, appeared at the head of the stairs.

"What did you think I was to do when you hid yourself? I should have given you credit for more sense. We have stumbled upon our friends again. Captain Hume, Mr. George Hume, — my niece, Miss Graham. What have you found here, Susan? Any thing worth looking at?"

Sir Henry made his way into the hall; Susan kept rather aloof. "A curious place, a very curious place!" muttered Sir

Henry, and he had recourse to Murray; whilst Captain Hume, and his intelligent, but sickly-looking son, were reading the names at the foot of the pictures, and trying to ransack their memories for history which had never had a place there.

"Monstrously ignorant every one is," said Sir Henry. "Susan, you must know something about it; you haven't left school so long as we have."

Susan did not hear; she was resting against the doorway looking out into the passage.

"Where is Egerton? He is sure to know, or to find out," said Sir Henry.

"We left him in the court below," replied Captain Hume. "He always sets to work methodically when he is lionising."

"Hark! he is talking," said Sir Henry, going out into the passage, and listening: "he has found some one to give him a little information. We'll have him up."

He went to the top of the stairs, put his foot on the first step, stumbled over a loose stone, and fell to the bottom.

Susan, Claude, Captain Hume, and his son, were collected together in an instant. Sir Henry had hurt himself; there was no doubt of that, for his face expressed great pain; but he would scarcely allow it. "It was a mere nothing," he said; "just a slip, that was all;" and he took hold of Claude's hand, and tried to stand up; but his ankle was in some way twisted, and his back bruised, and he was obliged to sit down.

"I had better go back to the hotel for the carriage," said Susan, in the quiet voice which was her characteristic when at all nervous or agitated.

"No, no," exclaimed Claude, "I will go; I must;" and he would have hurried away, but he was stopped by a faint entreaty from Sir Henry.

"Let her go, Claude; she will manage best. Poor Lady Augusta will be frightened else. Let her go."

"And I may go too, I suppose," said Claude, eagerly.

"Yes, yes; be quick," exclaimed Captain Hume. "Miss Graham, do you happen to have salts or eau de Cologne with you?" He rested Sir Henry's head against his knee; the pain was so great as to cause a sensation of faintness; yet Sir Henry laughed still, and declared he knew quite well what was the matter. A sprained ankle! That was all.

Susan looked at him with some anxiety.

"Nothing amiss, child. Don't put on such a long face. I shall be walking after you if you don't make haste."

Claude hurried her away.

They walked on in silence for some distance through the bustling arcades. Susan did not notice them now. A crowd of perplexing possibilities were presenting themselves; but they excited, instead of depressing her; she felt able to battle with them all.

Claude broke the silence. "I am thankful we were there, but I don't believe there is much the matter; you must not be uneasy."

"I care most for Lady Augusta," said Susan. "She is so soon made ill by over-excitement; but Helen will help to keep her quiet."

"Is Helen with Lady Augusta now?" asked Claude.

He said Helen quite naturally again. That stiff, uncomfortable notion of the necessity of talking of her as Miss Clare seemed to have passed away.

"Helen fancied she might please Lady Augusta by staying with her. She thinks of that the first thing always." Susan spoke very earnestly; a sense of justice impelled her. Helen doubtless ought to be restored to Claude's good opinion. She would have said the same, indeed, under any circumstances; but it demanded no effort now. There was no room for jealousy. Helen herself had contributed to remove any such feeling. The tone in which she spoke of Claude, the quiet way in which, when his name was mentioned, she assumed that his goings and comings, his actions and words, were indifferent to her—all tended to separate him from her in thought.

Susan's present anxiety was that he should think well enough of her; and that if they must meet, it should be on friendly and comfortable terms. She felt for them both.

It was a quick hot walk; weary and anxious, and little was said, and that little of small importance; but Susan could have gone much farther, and scarcely have felt inclined to stop.

Annette met them as they were about to enter the inn, tired, laden with purchases, and, as a consequence, out of humour. She began an expostulation, even before Susan had time to speak.

"Miss Graham! dinner will be cold. *Pardon*, Monsieur Egerton, I did not know what made Miss Graham so late." Her angry meaning tone roused Claude's indignation, and excited Susan's surprise. They both passed on without entering upon any explanation, but Susan stopped as they were half way up the

stairs, and said: "We had better take her into our counsels, it is the only way of keeping the peace. Annette!"

Annette came very slowly up the stairs, under the pretence that she was too exhausted to move more quickly.

Susan went down to meet her, and spoke in a confidential tone. "Poor Sir Henry has fallen down and hurt his foot, Annette. He is in the Upper Town, and he wants to have the carriage sent there for him. How shall we break the news to Lady Augusta?"

"Sir Henry fallen! his leg broke! he not be able to move. *Ah! quel malheur!*" And Annette began to wring her hands, and bewail so loudly, that the waiters gathered at the foot of the stairs to hear the news.

"*Quel malheur! quel malheur! Pauvre Miladi!*" screamed Annette.

Claude turned round sharply. "Silence, Annette; don't make a fool of yourself. If you can't do better than that, leave Lady Augusta to us."

"*Non! non!* you not understand at all; you not go to her." Annette rushed past Claude and Susan, and placed herself before the door of the salon. "Monsieur Egerton, you order the carriage, — Miladi will go into the fit; she will not bear a stranger. Miss Graham, you come with me."

Susan could scarcely refrain from a smile. There was something so indescribably ludicrous in the instinct which both she and Claude had to obey Annette's orders.

The smile was unfortunately seen, and it increased Annette's indignation. She motioned to Claude to go, but would not condescend to speak again; and seeing that it was really the best thing to be done, he said quietly to Susan, "I shall give the order, and then come back to see how Lady Augusta is;" and ran downstairs.

Annette stood for an instant facing Susan. "Ah! young ladies! they know best what they are at," she muttered, half aloud. "Captain Hume's man, he say that Monsieur Egerton is soon taken in."

Happily, Susan did not hear. She was as unconscious of Annette's suspicions, as she was of having excited more than a momentary annoyance.

Claude proceeded to the courtyard of the hotel with a feeling of fretful irritation, conscious of having been made a subject of impertinent observation, which yet it was beneath him to notice. His only hope was that Susan, in her simplicity, did not under-

stand, or that, if she did she would not care. That self-restrained, composed manner of hers, certainly put him very much at his ease with her, and it was so far dangerous that it led him to treat her in a way which might be open to observation. They were on those comfortable brother and sister terms which the world could not possibly be supposed to understand; and Claude, who always faced disagreeables manfully, at once made up his mind that he would be more prudent for the future, even if prudence destroyed the pleasure and freedom of their intercourse. Happily, they were not likely to be together very much, and perhaps it would be wiser under the circumstances for him to keep to the plan of going with Captain Hume to Milan, and leaving Venice for the present. There was a pang, a sharp, sharp pang as the resolution was made; Claude thought that it was caused by the feeling of loneliness, the knowledge that his going to either place was a matter of no real moment to any one.

He knocked at the door of the salon again, and was told by Susan to come in. Lady Augusta was in tears, almost hysterics. The intelligence of the accident had been communicated in the gentlest way, but it had completely upset her. Annette was bustling about looking for *sal volatile*, and asking the Italian for camphor-julep, and red lavender; Susan was trying to keep her quiet by following her and talking in an under tone; whilst Helen knelt by Lady Augusta, holding her hands and endeavouring, by every soothing, caressing tone and word, to tranquillise her.

"Claude! you are come. I am so thankful," murmured Lady Augusta; "you will tell us the worst. Helen, ask him to tell me at once; I can't wait."

Claude read great anxiety in Helen's eyes; but she only said, without looking at him, "It is but a slight accident, dear mamma; Susan was there, and knows all about it."

"But Claude—why won't he speak? He keeps every thing from me," said Lady Augusta.

"You had better tell her," said Helen; and she rose up and gave her place to Claude, and stood behind Lady Augusta, bathing her forehead with eau de Cologne, and every now and then whispering, "You are better now, dear mamma, and so we are all; it was only a slight accident."

Claude told what had happened in few words; but even before he had quite finished, Pietro sent word that the carriage was ready.

"Annette wants to go," whispered Susan, coming up to Helen; "She fancies nothing can be done without her."

Lady Augusta caught the words. "Yes, Annette had better go. Some one must go with Claude."

Claude suggested that there was nothing to be done, and that he should be quite sufficient; but poor Lady Augusta, all the more excitable and unreasonable because she was perfectly powerless, could not be pacified.

"It can't be," said Claude, aside to Susan; "that noisy woman would drive any man in pain out of his senses."

Helen left her place by the sofa, and came forward. "I am going," she said; "papa would rather have me than any one else. Good bye, mamma;" and she kissed Lady Augusta: "we shall bring him back in a very few minutes, and it will be all well."

She fastened her bonnet strings, hastily adjusted her mantilla, and saying to Claude, "Now, if you please, I am quite ready," led the way downstairs, without giving any one the opportunity of objecting.

A short silent drive that was to the foot of the steep hill. Neither Claude nor Helen spoke: when they began to ascend, Claude got out of the carriage and walked; and when they reached the courtyard of the deserted palace, he merely said that he would go in first, and left her sitting in the carriage. It was Captain Hume who came out to tell her that Sir Henry was better, and that she need not be uneasy, and begged her now she was there, to look at the building;—Captain Hume who advised her how to place the cushions and pillows she had brought,—and Captain Hume who, when Sir Henry was lifted into the carriage, and Helen seated by him, took the vacant place.

Claude said nothing, did nothing, seemed to care for nothing, except what common kindness for Sir Henry demanded.

Poor Helen! It was a bitter experience, but she felt that she had deserved it.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

A CABINET council was held when dinner was ended. Sir Henry had managed to eat in spite of the pain he was suffering, and that was sufficient evidence of the injury not being serious to satisfy even Lady Augusta for a time. But when the question of movement was mooted, all her fears revived.

Sir Henry was bent upon proceeding. He had no notion, he

said, of keeping them all cooped up, in an out-of-the-way town like Conegliano, when they were within a day's journey of Venice. If he must have rest, he would have it there. It was only the right foot which was really hurt, and he could easily get to the carriage without putting it to the ground, and when once there, he could rest it just as well as if he were lying on a sofa. As for his back, he would not allow that it was injured at all, though whenever he attempted to move he winced with pain. He argued, as persons who have any thing the matter with them generally do, in the most foolish and irrational way, simply in accordance with his own wishes; and as there was no one to control him, there was nothing to be done but to yield.

"That is settled, then," exclaimed Sir Henry, when at length he had silenced opposition; "so we start forthwith. Claude, my dear fellow, when shall we see you again?"

Claude had been standing a little apart, having soon given up the attempt of bringing Sir Henry to reason. He came forward now, and replied rather coldly, that it was impossible to say; all depended upon the letters which Captain Hume might find at Treviso.

"Claude," said Lady Augusta plaintively, "he is not going to leave us. We can't get on at all without him. We can't talk to Pietro; we can't do any thing."

"I have not lost the use of my tongue, my dear," said Sir Henry, impatiently; "not that we shouldn't be very glad to have Claude with us; very glad, indeed," he added, trying to move so as to face Claude.

Claude hesitated to reply, and looked at Captain Hume for his opinion. But immediately afterwards his eye wandered to the corner of the sofa, near which Helen was seated; Susan was just behind her, and the sight of her seemed to settle his resolution as he said, "I am afraid I could not disarrange Captain Hume's plans."

"Don't think of me," said Captain Hume, bluntly, but good-naturedly. "George and I shall do very well together, and it may be only for a few days; we shall join you at Venice, probably, before Sir Henry is able to leave it."

"I don't see what we are to do," said Lady Augusta, almost crying. "If we could only stay here! It is very pleasant to look out into the streets. I like Conegliano. If Sir Henry would only let me stay! but he always will go on."

"To be sure, my dear. There's a gondola waiting for you at Venice," said Sir Henry, in the tone which he would have used in

speaking to a spoilt child. Don't fear for us, Claude; don't put yourself out of your way: I wouldn't have you do so on my account. Helen just look into the next room for Annette, and tell her to order the carriage in a quarter of an hour. You go on with us to Treviso to-night?" he added, addressing Captain Hume.

"Why, no: at least not according to our original plans. I see we have had a longer day's journey than you; we came from Longarone this morning, and started unusually early: and to tell the truth, I think my boy has had enough of it. We talked of staying here to-night and having a rest for some hours, and perhaps strolling a little about the town in the evening, and making our way quietly on to Treviso to-morrow."

The announcement evidently gave Sir Henry a blank, uncomfortable feeling: he said nothing.

"I don't see why we shouldn't all stay," observed Lady Augusta. "We can't go without Claude. Who is to order dinner and look to our luggage? and who can help you, Sir Henry? and what are Helen and Susan to do? I think it very unkind. I can't go." And her face flushed, whilst her voice was raised to a high, harsh pitch.

"We must go," said Sir Henry, shortly. "We have written to secure beds at Treviso, and Sir John Hume has ordered rooms for us at Daniell's when we get to Venice, and our letters are all to be ready for us: we must go on."

Lady Augusta began to cry.

"The young ladies give no opinion," observed Captain Hume, trying to say something which would put every one at ease.

"I think it would be a comfort if Claude could go with us to Treviso to-night," answered Helen. She held Lady Augusta's hand whilst she was speaking, and Claude saw a tear drop from her eye.

He was decided at once; he did not even remark that Susan said nothing.

"Yes: that cuts the Gordian knot: thank you. Dear Lady Augusta, I will go with you to-night. Hume, if I don't wait for you at Treviso to-morrow, I will leave a note to tell you why."

"Come, Susan," said Helen, touching her cousin's arm; "we shall be late if we don't put on our bonnets."

"Susan is in a dream," said Sir Henry; "thinking of the deserted palace, the 'Count of Mont Alba's,' as a man told us while we were waiting there."

"Very unlike Miss Graham," said Claude. "She is present, not absent, generally, when any thing is to be done." And as the

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sound of his voice, Susan was so painfully present and coloured so deeply, that Helen came to her rescue, and remarking lightly that personal observations, whether good or bad, or indifferent, were never allowable, drew her into the adjoining room.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THE deserted palace was recalled to the recollection of all who had seen it, by the drive to Treviso. Handsome houses standing by the roadside, empty and decaying, gave an air of departed grandeur to the country, which imparted a feeling of melancholy, in spite of the delicious sensation of the climate, and the easy pace at which the carriage passed over the broad, smooth, and well kept road, as usual bordered with acacia trees.

Sir Henry made an effort to talk at first, but gave it up after a time; and Helen was sure, although he would not acknowledge it, that the motion of the carriage was trying to his back. Claude had taken possession of a small, uncomfortable, back seat, intended usually for Annette, but which she always declined, preferring the company of Pietro on the box. He was therefore quite out of reach of conversation; and as Lady Augusta soon fell asleep, and Helen and Susan, when tired of the acacia trees, both began to nod, the drive was silent and dull. It was late when they reached Treviso; a circumstance which provoked Sir Henry who had been consoling himself for having seen nothing on the road, by the prospect of amusement in the town. "The chief city of the province—the residence of a bishop,—a manufacturing place with eighteen thousand inhabitants, quite a marvel for Italy! was too tiresome to come in so late, and only to have a glimpse of narrow streets and arcades, like Conegliano and Sarravalle, and to go off again the next morning."

His thought of finding a good hotel rather consoled him; but again there was disappointment. The rooms were large, but astonishingly dirty; and with all the delight which Italy must afford, there is no question that dirt is as much a part of its charms as warmth. Carpets in bedrooms may be comforts in a cold climate, but they are just the reverse in a hot one; and poor Lady Augusta, particular and sensitive to a fault, even at Ivors, with horror at the dingy covering spread upon the floor of a handsome apartment, and insisted upon it, that before she

went to bed it should be rolled up and taken away, even at the risk of discovering the mountains of dust beneath, with which Annette threatened her.

Every one went to bed early; and Claude felt really thankful he had consented to come, when he found how helpless Sir Henry was, though still trying to keep up, and insisting that he should be perfectly well the next day. His back only wanted a night's rest, he said, and the Treviso beds were soft, if they were not very clean, so that he had no doubt of being able to sleep. He allowed Claude, however, to make inquiry for a chemist's shop, at which he might procure some laudanum, and took a small quantity, though laughing at the notion, and declaring that it was quite unnecessary. The next morning, however, brought a different tone. Whether from the effects of the laudanum or the fall Sir Henry did not feel so well and was disinclined to get up to breakfast. A consultation was held in his room with Claude and Pietro, and instead of starting in the morning, it was decided to wait till the afternoon. The drive to Mestre was not very long, and though the railway was not completed, a gondola would soon take them to Venice. And besides, one thing was quite clear to Claude now, that it would not do to leave Sir Henry in his present state. It would be actually cruel to Helen and Susan, who were already beginning to look anxious; and even if the plan had been disagreeable, he would have been consoled for making it, by the change which came over Lady Augusta when he announced his determination of giving up all thoughts of Milan, and proceeding with them to Venice, if Sir Henry should be well enough in the course of the day to move. She pressed his hand, and thanked him as though he had saved her from some fatal catastrophe; but neither Helen nor Susan expressed satisfaction, except that the former remarked, that any thing which kept Lady Augusta's mind from working must be good. It seemed that she did not think it right to betray any feeling of her own, and imagined that it was not her place to do so; and she kept quite aloof from Claude, putting Susan forward on every occasion. His being with them certainly did not raise her spirits, however it might relieve her from anxiety.

They went into the town after breakfast. Lady Augusta seemed so comforted by Claude's presence, that she consented to take a carriage, and drive to the cathedral; and whilst it was getting ready, she begged Claude to take Helen and Susan into the market, which was held in the square immediately in front of the hotel. She, as usual, stationed herself at the window,

with Annette by her side, commenting in French upon all that was going on below.

There was a strange medley: birds, bread, coloured cloth, handkerchiefs, macaroni, fruit, fish, flowers, shoes and boots, both old and new, were all displayed upon the stalls; and in and out amongst them passed crowds of men and women; the latter wearing large straw hats, but otherwise having a less peculiar dress than the Tyrolese. Eating seemed as much a part of the business of the day as buying and selling: chestnuts boiled in pots, set over little pans of charcoal, and slices from hot cakes made of Indian corn, and looking very like gourds, being the favourite delicacies. The long arcades in the streets were full of bustle also; but the square was the chief attraction, and Helen acknowledged to Susan that, if she were allowed her choice, she thought she should prefer staying there, if Annette could be with her, and trying to sketch rather than going to the cathedral.

Claude began a sentence which sounded as though he intended to offer to stay also; but Helen interrupted him before it was finished, by saying in a very quiet tone, that she could not allow Lady Augusta to drive about without her.

"I would take great care of her," said Susan, whilst unconsciously at the same moment a change came over her face, which showed that she did not enter into the idea.

"Thank you; I know you would. But she was pleased with my being with her yesterday, and I would rather not leave her to-day."

And so they drove to the cathedral, a handsome but unfinished building, with five domes: and Lady Augusta sat in the carriage whilst the rest went in, and looked at Pordenone's ruined frescoes, and tried to admire a Titian over the high altar, and studied a curious old picture, representing a procession of the authorities of the town; and at last stole apart from each other to enjoy the building alone, till Helen suggested that Lady Augusta would be tired.

"Pictures are thrown away in a church," said Claude, as he seated himself in the carriage, and told the driver to take them to San Nicolo; "at least, that is the conclusion I have arrived at. Perhaps one over the altar may be an exception, but even then I doubt whether carving is not better. If they are good they draw one's attention from the effect of the building, and if they are bad they are simply disfigurements."

"If one could get over the feeling that it is one's duty to look at them, it would not signify," said Susan; "but whatever is men-

tioned in the Guide Book it seems part of one's travelling business to examine. After all, I suppose, we are great moral cowards in these matters. Shall we give up searching for pictures in churches for the future, Helen?"

Helen did not seem to understand that she was addressed; but when Susan repeated the question, she said, a little sadly, that she had not looked at the pictures in the cathedral; at least, she had not thought about them.

"You were with us," said Claude quickly.

"Only just for the first few minutes; but you did not notice when I moved away."

Claude was silent: and a strange pang of pity, mingled with some other feeling, almost akin to satisfaction, was felt by Susan. It did seem that when she was near, Claude had no thought for any one else.

San Nicolo was ugly enough on the outside to induce Susan to propose that they should exercise their moral courage, and not trouble themselves to examine it; but Claude objected. It was the first specimen he had seen of the old brick buildings to be found in the north of Italy, and he was anxious to look at it more closely. Susan, yielding to his slightest suggestion, was out of the carriage before he was able to assist her; and owned herself repaid by the general effect of the interior, and struck by the peculiarity of seeing the great pillars in the aisle half covered with crimson cloth. Helen, as before, kept aloof, and not only when they were in the church, but afterwards as they drove round the town. She allowed Claude to continue a conversation with Susan without attempting to take part in it, and seemed only employed in pointing out to Lady Augusta all that was worth noticing; whilst Claude, safe from Annette's remarks, and delighted to find some one who could share his tastes, entered *con amore* into the subject of the Lombard brick architecture, promising, as soon as they reached Venice, to show Susan some books upon the subject which he had brought with him.

They found Sir Henry better on their return. Claude acted the part of valet, and assisted him to dress. Sir Henry himself made many apologies for the trouble he gave, blaming himself for not having foreseen the possibility of an accident, and brought a servant or a courier, or some one of mankind with him; an omission, he assured Claude, which was entirely owing to Annette, who was essential to Lady Augusta, and had quarrelled so grievously with the courier at Innsbruck that they had been obliged to leave him behind. "A woman at the bottom of the trouble!—always the

case, Claude," he said, whilst Claude helped him to hop into the salon. "You remember the story of the Shah of Persia: when he was told that a workman had fallen from a ladder, he called out, 'Who is she? who is she?' 'Please your majesty, 'tis a he.' 'Nonsense, there's never an accident without a woman. Who is she?' The Shah was right, Claude; the man had fallen from his ladder because he was looking at a woman at a window. Many a man does that in other countries besides Persia."

They left Treviso early in the afternoon, Sir Henry grumbling at the dark salon in which they had dined, and giving vent to as much rage as his good-nature would allow at the terrific bill brought him by the landlord, whose only excuse was, that he had charged more because it was market-day!

No tidings had been heard of Captain Hume and his son; but Claude left a note, telling them why he found it impossible to leave Sir Henry, and urging them, if possible, to follow them to Venice.

CHAPTER LXXV.

ANOTHER long dull drive to Mestre, of all places the most uninteresting. What situation could be more destitute of beauty, than the low swampy levels bordering the narrow channel of the sea which separates Venice from the mainland? It requires every early historical association of Attila and his invading Huns, and the flight of the frightened Italians, and the wonderful rise of the fairy city from the islands bordered by the muddy Lagune, to give the slightest charm to the approach to Venice. Yet so strong is the power of imagination, that few probably can for the first time find themselves in a gondola, pushing off from the shore, and floating away between low flat banks, without a house, a tree, or even a fence in view, and not experience a sensation so new and bewildering, and yet so exciting, that it would not be exchanged for the delight of the most glorious scenery of the Alps.

"A gondola, my dear, you see," said Sir Henry to Lady Augusta, as they drove down to the waterside, and saw the long narrow boat, with a curved beak and sepulchral awning, drawn up alongside the quay.

Poor Lady Augusta was tired, and, as usual, inclined to be fretful. She could not see, she said, how they were all to get into the gondola, it was so small. And what would Sir Henry do with his lame leg?

"We must have two gondolas," said Claude, coming up to the side of the carriage — "one for Annette and the luggage, and the other for ourselves."

"Not quite room enough, I am afraid, even then," said Sir Henry, laughing, "considering that I go for two. Those ancient senators never travelled, I conclude, or they would have provided some more convenient mode of transit for the bags and boxes."

"Well! then Annette and I will occupy the luggage-gondola," said Claude, good-naturedly.

But Lady Augusta would not hear of such a thing. She could not stir without Claude. "If the gondola should upset," she said, "what would Sir Henry do?"

Claude laughed heartily, which rather displeased Lady Augusta, but she still would not allow the possibility of going in a gondola without him. Susan was about to speak, when the question was set at rest by Helen, who pushed open the carriage door, jumped out, and going up to Annette, said, "Now Annette, you and I must manage; we are to go together."

"*Ah! oui; mais que ferons-nous? Arrêtez-vous! où allez-vous?* where you taking that box?" and Annette caught hold of one of the host of porters and beggars who crowded the quay, and were seizing upon the luggage as Pietro took it off the carriage, conveying it away whither they did not take the trouble to tell.

Claude came to her assistance, and forbade any thing to be moved till he had given orders, telling Annette, at the same time to stand by and guard it, whilst he placed Helen in the gondola.

"You solved our difficulty for us," he said, when they stood for a moment together on the quay; "but no one thanked you."

"I don't want thanks," was Helen's reply; "it was my place."

And Claude said no more.

A considerable time elapsed before Sir Henry and Lady Augusta, and the luggage, and, above all, Annette, could be properly disposed of. Without Claude's assistance it would have been almost a work of impossibility. Annette, good-natured in general, was still never forgetful of herself; and there was a certain basket containing some secret valuables, which was not at once forthcoming when she looked for it in the luggage-gondola; and not all Claude's assurances that every thing had been put in, nor Helen's entreaties that she would not delay any longer, could induce her to move her foot from the quay till it was found. Fiercely she interrogated the unfortunate porters, and threatened the beggars, and scolded Mademoiselle, and cast scornful glances at Claude. They might have waited for her till midnight, she

cared not; Lady Augusta was dependent upon her, and they could not move without her.

"Never mind," said Claude, seeing Helen's distressed face, as Sir Henry raised his voice in towering indignation, whilst Lady Augusta began to cry, "we will go, and return for her." He made a sign to the gondoliers; and Annette, seizing his arm, gave a bound, which drew a shout of laughter from the bystanders, and found her place in the gondola, and her basket under the seat.

"Off at last!" said Sir Henry, as the gondola was pushed away from the bank. "We are later than we ought to be; but that we always are. Annette shall have a considerable rowing when we get back to Ivors; we can't afford it now."

He looked round rather anxiously. The evening shades were deepening, and clouds were gathering in the sky, threatening a thunderstorm. No one replied to his observation. The stillness of the air and the gliding motion of the gondola, moving on seemingly without effort, had a subduing, solemnising effect upon the spirits of all. It seemed as though they were wandering forth on a voyage of discovery, propelled by some unknown power. There was neither the restless life of the ocean nor the firmness of the land to give strength and energy to their movements; but on they floated, slumberingly, silently, as, in search of some phantom city of rest, lying far off, amidst the shadows of night.

Another delay:—An Austrian government vessel was moored at the entrance of the narrow passage, and passports were demanded, and given up to be examined: and Lady Augusta fell fairly asleep, whilst the gondola waited beneath the dark vessel,—the light of some dim candles bringing out, in Rembrandt-like relief, the figures of the few soldiers on the deck.

But an end came at last. The passports were restored; and again they glided on, away from the narrow banks, and across one of the many channels of the Adriatic, which open a way through the Lagoon to the island city.

"See," said Claude,—he laid one hand involuntarily upon Susan's, and with the other pointed to the horizon. A flash of lightning glanced from the dark clouds; and, rising out of the water, a line of tall, misty buildings burst for one moment upon the sight, and then all was darkness again, and silence, and mystery, till the sound of bells, with a slow and heavy toll, came softly over the sea; and they had reached Venice.

The flashes of the summer lightning soon became more brilliant. Lady Augusta, aroused from her short slumber, would have been excited and frightened but for Claude's presence. Her trust in

him seemed unbounded; and he managed her so kindly, yet so firmly;—Susan could not help saying to him once, that they must be very thankful to him; and he answered simply, that it was an equal cause of thankfulness to him. His first sight of Venice would have been very different to him if he had been with those who could not feel with him.

A line of houses was now before them. It seemed that they were approaching directly in front of them; but the gondoliers dexterously turned a sharp corner, and they found themselves in a street of water,—the tall, irregular houses on each side, built of brick, and having sufficient space before them for a footpath. But this was only at the entrance of the city: as the gondolas entered narrower canals, the walls of the buildings came close to the water's edge, and doors opened from the houses directly upon it. Yet the sight of human habitations gave but little idea of human existence. Gloom, stillness, mystery brooded over the faintly-gleaming, watery streets. There were no sounds of mirth in the houses, no indications of the bustle of traffic or the excitement of pleasure. The idea of any living being as connected with those once princely dwellings never suggested itself to the mind. It might well have been a city of the dead; for the only life that exhibited itself was the ghostly gondola which occasionally glided by like a floating coffin, giving notice of its approach by the light fastened to the awning, and casting a sudden gleam upon the carving and ornament of some house, splendid even in its decay; and then passing noiselessly away, and leaving all again to the increasing darkness.

But the gondolas emerged from the narrow canal, and crossed one much broader, and more winding in its course. Lights were seen in the houses, lights upon the wide covered bridge, with its single arch spanning the canal.

"The Rialto," said Claude to Susan; and she instinctively looked up, as though the forms of Shylock and Antonio were still to be seen there, forgetful of Murray's warning, so kindly destructive of all such fond imaginations, that in Shakspeare's time the present Ponte di Rialto could scarcely have been completed.

"If Helen were but with us!" said Susan. She looked back to be quite certain that the other gondola was following.

"We could have found room for her," said Sir Henry; "only she was so quick in her arrangements. I think she likes to make a victim of herself."

Claude bent over the side of the gondola, and strained his eyes to see. He fell into a reverie after Sir Henry's remark, and

Susan was fretted at finding that the congenial silence was quite broken, and that she was obliged to talk to her uncle, and to Lady Augusta.

"We must be near Danieli's now," said Sir Henry; "I believe it is close upon the Grand Canal."

Lady Augusta was revived by the intelligence, for she was becoming excessively tired, and inclined to complain because Annette was not with her, though what assistance Annette could have afforded under the circumstances was quite a problem.

"Not quite so close either," continued Sir Henry, in a disappointed tone. "Why, we are getting into those narrow places again,—very romantic, I dare say they are, but there is no end to them."

Sir Henry was right. In and out went the gondolas again, all in the darkness and quietness. At length they entered one canal which was singularly narrow and gloomy. The dim light still lingering in the sky showed that it was shut in by two large buildings; one lofty and richly ornamented, the other lower and perfectly plain. A high covered bridge connected them.

"Il Ponte dei Sospiri," said the foremost gondolier; and even Lady Augusta sat more upright as they drew near the Bridge of Sighs; and turning to her husband, she said: "Do they keep the people in prison now, as they used to do?"

Sir Henry made no reply. They were passing under the high arch; and even sixty years of rough contact with the world had not extinguished, though it might have deadened, the feelings of horror and indignation which the most noted scene of Venetian tyranny is calculated to excite. But they were only momentary. The gondola turned sharply round the corner of the palace, and once more they were in the Grand Canal, and in sight of the brilliantly lighted and exquisitely beautiful arcades of the Piazzetta of St. Mark, with the tall granite Byzantine columns, keeping guard, as it were, over the soul of the city.

For human existence in Venice—that existence at least, which first meets the eye of the stranger—is all concentrated in the great square of St. Mark: without, all is still and sepulchral in its solemnity; within, all is mirth, light, and gaiety. As the republic was in its political career, so is the city still in its outward form—life and death, the most sparkling beauty and the deepest gloom, have there for centuries stood side by side; and the noiseless transition from the dazzling loveliness of the Piazzetta to the darkness of the Bridge of Sighs, is but the type of that secret, sudden, often repeated transit, so common in Venetian

history, from the hopes and gladness of life to the dread stillness of the grave.

"Danieli's at last!" It was Claude who made the remark, as they stopped in front of an archway in a side canal, with steps leading down to the water's edge. Claude hastened to inquire for rooms, as they had been ordered some days before, and he supposed they were all ready. But the face of the master of the hotel excited his consternation. He seemed totally unprepared for such an arrival—there had been some mistake. Rooms had, indeed, been ordered for a party travelling from Innsbruck, but they had arrived, they had already taken possession.

"No mistake at all," was Claude's answer. "We wrote to a friend to engage the rooms; we expected to have the rooms; in fact, we must have them. There are two invalids in the party, and they must be accommodated."

"Very unfortunate! extremely perplexing!" The civil landlord's obsequiousness increased with his difficulties: "he had no doubt he should be able to manage; the hotel happened unfortunately to be extremely full; but he had rooms, very comfortable—they should be prepared."

Claude hesitated, having some doubt about the comfortable rooms in a house already overcrowded. He went back to suggest to Sir Henry that they should try another hotel.

Lady Augusta, however, was urgent to remain where they were; she was very tired, and wanted to go to bed, and she tried to leave the gondola even before Claude was ready to give her his hand.

Sir Henry shrugged his shoulders, and said she must have her way; but he would not attempt to move himself until he was quite sure that Lady Augusta would not change her mind. "And you can stay too, Susan," he added.

But Susan had followed Lady Augusta, and was already standing on the steps.

"We must not forget that there are letters here," she said. "Sir John Hume, must have remembered them, in spite of the blunder about the rooms."

"But Claude can ask for them, child; there is no occasion for you to trouble yourself."

"Thank you, no; I would rather go, it will make me happier;" and Susan, in her eagerness, hastened after the master of the hotel, asking her own questions, without waiting for Claude.

"What is the matter with Susan? Why does she hurry so?" said Lady Augusta, as Claude led her slowly up the staircase.

"She heard from home a short time ago; what can she want to hear again for?"

Claude smiled at the question. He had not remarked Susan's eagerness as any thing unusual, until Lady Augusta drew his attention to it. Then it made but little impression, for he was thinking only of the "comfortable apartments." They were shown into a dingy salon, evidently the forlorn hope of the hotel, never to be used except in cases of emergency. Lady Augusta sat down in the nearest chair, and looked round her in dismay. "Venice!—this Venice!" She had expected a palace.

"The best we have, very sorry; but all will be found extremely comfortable," said the landlord, with one of his most courteous bows.

"I should like to have the letters very much," said Susan, in a timid tone.

"But we must look at the bedrooms first," observed Lady Augusta, fretfully. "I don't see how we are to sleep in a place like this; and beds were ordered. It is very wrong; we should not have cared what we paid. Where is Annette? I want her."

Annette appeared at the door with Helen, porters followed behind, bringing boxes and bags, with which the floor was soon covered.

"I could not prevent them," said Helen, going up to Claude. "I suspect the landlord had given them orders, not wishing to lose us. But these rooms won't do."

"They must for to-night," observed Claude. "Won't you look at the bedrooms now? and then I will go back for Sir Henry."

"*Venez, mademoiselle, venez,*" said Annette, authoritatively, opening the door of a bedroom adjoining the salon. "Miss Graham, you come too."

But Susan was quite lost to present interests. The landlord had produced a letter for her; and in the midst of the bustle and chattering, the rushing to and fro, the flinging down of boxes upon the floors, the complaints of Annette, and the murmurings of Lady Augusta, she stood reading her letter by the light of a dim lamp, placed upon a square, uncovered table, which only served to bring out in stronger relief the general discomfort of the apartment.

Claude glanced at her countenance—excitement, agitation, a strange mixture of joy and sorrow were to be read there. She read on and on rapidly, as though she could not bear to lose a word: then turned back to obtain a meaning which in her eager-

ness she had missed ; and at length, folding up the letter, looked round her, with the air of one just wakened from a dream.

"Lady Augusta and Helen are gone to see the bedrooms," said Claude.

"Oh ! yes." Susan's very quiet manner was restored when she became conscious of the presence of another, and she walked into the adjoining room without allowing any further sign of excited feeling to betray itself. Here she found sufficient certainly to concentrate her attention upon the present. Lady Augusta was almost in hysterics. "Such a cold unfurnished room ! Such a miserable place ! And beds covered in with those curtains, they would stifle her ; she should not sleep all night. Mosquitoes ! what business had mosquitoes in a first-rate hotel ? It was quite shocking. And how could she dress ? There was no dressing-table,—no washing-stand,—nothing. Danieli's hotel good ! It was the very worst she had ever entered."

Helen suggested that they had no right to expect any thing better under the circumstances. These were evidently never used except from necessity.

"Then why give them to us ? it is an insult. I won't stay here. How am I to dress ?"

Annette opened the door into a little dressing-room, but this only served to make matters worse. It was but a long dark strip ; the floor, encrusted to represent marble, seemed a mixture of cold and dirt. Lady Augusta looked in, and then sat down in a chair wringing her hands.

"We will go to another hotel, dear mamma," said Helen, gently. "This is not the only one to be found in Venice."

"But to-night ! what for to-night ?" exclaimed Annette. "Just see ;" she pointed to some boxes, which had been brought into the room. "It will take an hour to carry them downstairs again."

Helen drew near to Susan, who was standing in the doorway between the salon and the bedroom. "What must we do ?" she said ; "if this is the best room, what will the worst be ? I don't think we possibly can remain."

Susan, usually so sympathetic, appeared suddenly to have lost her sympathy. She answered, in an abstracted, wondering tone, "Can't we ?"

Helen was provoked, and said sharply, "No, we can't. Mamma won't bear it." But the irritation was checked in a moment, as she added, "I think, Susan, you are tired."

"Rather, yes ; perhaps it would be better to try another hotel," said Susan, endeavouring to shake off her absence of mind. She

moved to speak to Claude; but he was quite close, and had heard what passed. Scarcely noticing Helen, he addressed himself to Susan, seeming to imagine that the arrangement of every thing rested with her. It was quite clear, he said, that it would be better to try another hotel; but as the same thing might happen again, he thought it would be better to order tea for Lady Augusta, Helen, and Susan, and then go himself in the gondola with Sir Henry, to see if they could find better accommodation at the Imperatore, which had also been recommended to him. If they could have superior rooms there, he would return for them.

He said this to Susan; but it was Helen who thanked him, so heartily, so gracefully! with her marvellously bewitching smile; softened, as it had been of late, into an expression in which a latent sadness could always be perceived. It was a reproach to Claude's sensitive conscience for not having put her prominently forward; but Helen was always in the background now, except where Lady Augusta's comfort was concerned.

Lady Augusta, after a little persuasion, consented to the plan proposed. Tea was prepared in the general salon of the hotel, a long, large room, not particularly attractive in appearance; but it was a great luxury to have good coffee, and fresh bread and butter, and all other *et-ceteras* placed upon the table in a style which would not have disgraced Paris; and again Lady Augusta's mind had assumed a new phase, and when Claude returned with the intelligence that he had secured splendid rooms at the Imperatore, she would willingly have remained where she was, and might even have complained of Claude, if Helen had not undertaken his defence, and insisted that they were under the greatest obligation to him and could not possibly have managed without him.

So orders were given to Annette to pack the carpet-bags again, she in her energy having begun to unpack them, and once more the porters rushed backwards and forwards with the luggage, and the landlord, polite still, but very cold, was paid his bill, and in about ten minutes' time, the whole party were gliding, as before, in a gondola, along the great thoroughfare of the silent city. This time it was Susan who took her place with the luggage, before any one had time to remark what she was doing. Claude and Helen sat together without speaking, whilst the brilliant Piazza, the tall buildings, the lights in the windows reflected in the water, passed before them like the unrealised beauty of a dream; and like a dream too, or rather like the unsubstantial reality of fairy land, was the grandeur of the Imperatore, a palace

in appearance, once a palace in fact. The flight of broad steps, and the large court surrounded by pillars, and having a fountain in the centre, the splendid suite of rooms, with painted walls and ceiling, floors representing marbles, and sofas and chairs covered with crimson and white damask, were strangely in contrast with the dinginess of Treviso, and the scantily-furnished apartments of Capo di Ponte, and Cortina d'Ampezzo; and at last Lady Augusta and Sir Henry were thoroughly satisfied.

Perhaps they were the only members of the party who had cause to be so.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

SUSAN was the first person who appeared in the salon the next morning. Helen was tired, and had taken advantage of the certainty that Lady Augusta would be late. She was in much better spirits, however, as Susan informed Claude when he joined her; for she was sanguine as to the effect of rest and quiet amusement upon Lady Augusta's mind. As to Susan's own spirits, Claude did not, of course, inquire about them; but they were a problem to him. She talked a good deal, yet rather as though she were trying to keep down some thought which would strive to be uppermost, than as if really interested, even in Venice. Yet the palace of the Foscari was immediately opposite, and the waters of the Grand Canal were before her, and the gondolas passed backwards and forwards in front of the windows, giving a view of that singular amphibious life which only Venice can offer, and which it would seem must occupy the attention, if any thing external can. But no, Susan was not occupied; and Claude heard her confess to Helen, when after some delay they all sat down to breakfast, that she had passed a sleepless night.

"Papa says we must engage a gondola to take us out regularly," said Helen. "I went into his room just now to ask him how he was; and he says he is so much better, that he thinks in a day or two he shall be able to take care of us himself."

Claude's countenance fell. He said, rather drily: "In that case, if Captain Hume should be in Venice, I shall be able to go to Milan with him, as I at first intended."

Susan's hand trembled as she was lifting her coffee cup; but no one saw it, and Helen said, quietly: "We should be sorry to interrupt your plans, but you have been a great help to us."

"A crutch for Sir Henry," said Claude, trying to laugh; "but, if I am to go soon, I must make the best use of my time. Do you think you shall be able to go out this morning?" he added, addressing Lady Augusta.

"Perhaps, by and by, in the evening; but it is pleasant sitting at the window, and the heat makes me ill."

Claude looked very blank. He had not exactly calculated before upon the difficulties of seeing Venice when both Sir Henry and Lady Augusta were invalids.

"Sir John and Lady Hume," he said, "were to take up their quarters at the Leone Bianco, I believe; the distance is not very great, I could go to them this morning, and if you did not dislike the idea of seeing them, they might be useful to Helen, and" — a slight pause — "Miss Graham."

"Mamma won't like it," replied Helen, quickly; "she has not seen Lady Hume for a long time, and we can wait very well. Papa will be better, I dare say, in a day or two."

But Claude persisted, and pressed the question again upon Lady Augusta, who seemed annoyed, and said that they might as well be in England if they were to have only English people about them.

"Pray, pray don't," said Helen, in an under tone; but Lady Augusta heard.

"Why do you say don't? what do you mean? I can't bear mysteries. Why can't you all speak out? what is the matter?"

"Nothing, dear mamma! only Claude is anxious we should go about and see every thing, and we are willing to wait till you can take us," answered Helen, soothingly.

"I don't want you to wait for me, I can do very well with Annette," said Lady Augusta, in a fretful tone. "People who are ill are always in the way. It would be a good thing if I was taken out of it."

Helen's eyes filled with tears. She turned appealingly to Susan, who had been sitting very silent, pretending to eat rather than really eating her breakfast, and said: "What are we to do?" Susan started; her thoughts had been absent, she only half comprehended the question, and in reply observed that she had letters to write.

"Then you had better go out by yourself," continued Helen, speaking to Claude with quiet determination of manner; "and if you will engage a gondola for us for the evening, we shall do very well, very well indeed," she added, cheerfully. "With the Palazzo Foscari before us, what can we want more?"

She rose from the breakfast-table as she spoke, and proposed to Lady Augusta to have her chair drawn near the window. Claude assisted her in moving it, whilst Susan left the room.

Annette was summoned to bring Lady Augusta's work-basket, and attend to several other little needs, any one of which, neglected, would have caused a fit of ill-humour ; and Claude proposed to go and see Sir Henry. Yet he lingered in the room still. Helen was searching in her portfolio for some drawing-paper, having a fancy to sketch some of the beautiful bits of ornamental architecture on the opposite side of the canal. He went up to her, and asked, in a low voice, whether she was quite sure they were right about Lady Hume.

"Quite sure we must do whatever pleases mamma," replied Helen, bending down over her drawing.

"But your cousin? Won't you think of her?" said Claude, eagerly.

Helen's eyes were raised for a moment to his with an involuntary, but searching, look of inquiry. As they sank again, she said, "I did not remember her. I will talk to mamma again ; or, perhaps, if Lady Hume would call, I would see her if mamma would not ; and then, if she were going anywhere, Susan might go with her."

"And you?" said Claude.

"I can't go ; it doesn't signify ; don't think about me." Helen moved away, apparently unwilling to pursue the conversation ; and Claude went to Sir Henry. He came back again after some time, saying that he was going out, and should engage a gondola for a week, and call at the post office ; perhaps, also, he might go to the Leone Bianco, and see Sir John and Lady Hume, and learn if Captain Hume was expected. He said this intending Lady Augusta to remark upon it ; but she said nothing, neither did Helen.

Lady Augusta took her crochet, Helen her drawing, Susan her writing-case. They might have been at home as regarded their occupations, except that the exquisite outline of Helen's sketch could never have been suggested by any architecture in England. The quietness was so singular, from the absence of all the usual noises of a great city, that it struck Helen at last with a sense of the ludicrous. "Would any one believe," she exclaimed, "that three people could sit themselves down, as we are doing now, to crochet, and dull sketching, and writing, with Venice before them unseen?"

"Necessity," replied Susan, without raising her eyes ; and she went on writing rapidly.

Helen laid down her pencil, and watched her. "Susan, I envy you ; I would give worlds to be so quiet."

"Am I quiet?" replied Susan. She did look up now ; and her full, dark grey eyes seemed expanded with some intense feeling. She put a letter across the table to Helen, and said, "Read that."

And Helen read ; and when she had finished, she folded up the letter again, and, stealing gently to the opposite side of the table, so as not to attract Lady Augusta's attention, bent over Susan, and, kissing her tenderly, said, in a low voice, "I am so glad if you are."

"Yes, I am, — I think so ; but it is all strange. I will tell you more by and by ; but I wanted you to know."

Helen returned to her drawing, Susan to her writing.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

CLAUDE in the meantime was gliding down the Grand Canal.

He engaged a gondola for the week, went to the post office, and to the Leone Bianco, found Lady Hume at home and enlisted her compassion in behalf of Helen and Susan, and persuaded her to call in the afternoon and take them to the Piazza and St. Mark's, roused Miss Hume to enthusiasm on the subject of pictures, and proposed a plan for spending the next morning at the Academia, and, in fact, played so perfectly the part of brother and disinterested friend, that neither Lady Hume nor her daughters, when they gossiped about him after he was gone, could find any thing in what he had said or done to excite any interesting speculation as to his feelings, except that he had spoken of Helen as Miss Clare ; and so they supposed he must still bear her a grudge for having jilted him.

Poor Claude ! he floated back to the Imperatore, yielding himself to the luxurious feelings caused by the delicious climate, and the gliding motion, and the magic beauty of the buildings, whilst care was lulled to rest, and sorrow so soothed that it ceased to be pain ; and hope, gentle and enticing, lured him on to those soft, rainbow-like visions of the future which we indulge unconscious of danger, because there appears no prospect of their being realised. Life in that marvellous city of beauty and repose appeared so unlike the bustling selfishness and the harsh conflict

with opposing wills to which he had of late been accustomed, that he thought of it as of a different existence; and once more the deep poetry of his nature was awakened within him, and he dreamed of happiness.

Yet it was not the happiness which he had pictured to himself at Ivors, when in the fulness of his devotion he had knelt before Helen Clare and offered his heart, not to her, but to the creature of his own imagination. That dream, from which he had been so rudely awakened, could never return. He might love, but it would be in a different way. His was not a nature to be deceived twice; and now the form which hovered before his eyes, though it had the outward lineaments of the same Helen, bore the impress of a character far different from that which he had then, even in his highest moments, imagined.

He saw her not as an angel, but a woman—with much to repent of—much for which even he could attempt no extenuation; but conscious of her faults, struggling against the temptations which beset her to yield to them, with the strength which gave the victory to the martyrs of old; and bearing with her wherever she moved the power of that deep-rooted earnestness of purpose which is the life of ever self-denying, action, and without which action is worthless. Lovely she was still; but it was a beauty which angels might share, for it was the loveliness of a redeemed and purified spirit; and when age should destroy the freshness of its charm, it would still be there, seen by the eye of God, and acknowledged by the reverence of man. Graceful also, and winning, she appeared to him; but the grace was accompanied by the repose of humility, and the winning brightness of her smile was tempered by the thoughtful sadness of one who could never forget that God had placed before her “life and death, blessing and cursing,” and that, by the wilfulness of her own choice, she had turned from life, and accepted death.

When Claude landed at the steps of the Imperatore, the fevered thought working in his brain was,—did the Helen so changed, so chastened, look upon him with an eye as different from the fancy of former days as that with which he regarded her?

It was a question to be solved,—how, when, where, he knew not, and could not trust himself to think.

Annette met him in the court yard: he had a letter for her, and gave it, and received, instead of thanks, complaints that she had not had it before. She tried to prevent him from going in: Lady Augusta, she said, was resting on the sofa in the salon; and it would be better not to interrupt her. Dinner had been ordered

at two o'clock; and they were all going out in the gondola afterwards. Sir Henry was writing in his room.

There was no companionship for Claude; and unable, in the present state of his mind, to bear solitude, he dismissed his gondola, and hurried away to find the intricate alleys and narrow lanes in which the main business of the city is conducted. The Venetian world was seen here in its most crowded, energetic form; and it was this which Claude needed. The doubt suggested to his mind became more and more agonising as he realised the possibility of solving it; and to distract his thoughts was his strong necessity. He strode on through the bustling alleys, forcing himself to remark every thing strange, stopping before the small open shops without windows, in which men and women were plying their different trades; listening to the unintelligible jargon of women seated at stalls, selling fruits and boiling chestnuts; standing upon a steep bridge over some narrow canal, and watching a gondola glide underneath it; then pausing before a church with an open space in front, and once or twice entering to admire the gorgeous marbles and mosaics, and to wonder that so much richness should be lavished to so little purpose as regarded the general effect.

It was one o'clock before he found himself in the Merceria. There, while trying to amuse himself with looking at the shops, which are certainly the best in Venice, he recognised the tones of a voice he knew, and saw, to his surprise, Annette standing at the entrance of a Turkey warehouse, and bargaining for a Turkish dressing gown. She was talking eagerly; yet she saw Claude, as she saw every thing and every person. Nothing under any circumstances escaped her observation.

"Ah! Monsieur Egerton. How did you come? I thought you gone home."

"No, Annette, you could not have thought that; you saw me leave the hotel. But what business have you here?"

"Business! a great deal: why must you inquire?" and Annette frowned. "Am I not to see the world? You all so selfish, you never think of the ladies' maids; and they slave, slave, they nothing but slaves."

"Nonsense, Annette," said Claude, good humouredly; "you know there are no persons in the world more thought of than ladies' maids: and as for you, you rule every thing."

"*Badinage! folie!* I never understand Monsieur Egerton, he speaks so queer." But Annette's tone was softened, and she added, "*Pauvre Sir Henri*, he must have a new dressing-gown,

and I said I would see for it for him. Miladi begged me to come out. When you were gone she waked up, and Miladi Hume called and took Miss Graham out, and Mademoiselle stayed with Miladi; and then Sir John's man was in the court yard, and he offer to come with me here. So now, Monsieur Egerton, you understand." And Annette drew herself up with the proud satisfaction of having quite redeemed herself from any suspicion of neglect of duty.

"Quite, Annette, quite. Miss Clare, you said, stayed with Lady Augusta?"

"Yes; but Miladi did not wish it, only Mademoiselle said that it would be well for me to get out; and Sir Henry, he like her to read to him. Mademoiselle a very good daughter, Monsieur Egerton."

Annette nodded oracularly, and returned to her bargain with the master of the Turkey warehouse.

The natural thing for Claude to do was to leave her; but some secret feeling detained him. He gave his opinion unasked about the pattern of the dressing-gown, and lingered to look at some curious Turkish purses and bags, and purchased a box of sweetmeats for an old friend in England. When Annette had finished her business, he asked if she was going back.

She seemed a little annoyed at the question, probably fancying that it implied some control over her movements. Sir John's man, she said, would take very good care of her. She should be at home in time for Lady Augusta's dinner. It was hard not to have some few minutes at her own disposal; and it was so hot, so hot!

What this had to do with the former part of the sentence Claude not tell; but Annette sat down in the shop, apparently fatigued, and with a full determination not to move.

"Well, then, I shall tell Lady Augusta where I left you, so that she need not be anxious. Have you any idea where Lady Hume was going to take Miss Graham?"

Annette's eyes flashed with some sudden thought. Forgetting her exhaustion, she started from her seat and seized Claude by the arm. "Ah! monsieur, monsieur!" And she shook her head at him so solemnly, that Claude burst into a fit of laughter.

"Very well to laugh, but no laughing matter; you will know soon enough; and then you will cry."

"Cry? senseless woman!" and Claude shook herself from her and spoke quite fiercely; "tell me at once what you mean!"

"You young gentlemen very blind; you think your ladies

angels; but they not angels at all. Miss Graham is a *fiancée*; she engaged to be married, as you call it."

Annette fixed her eyes upon Claude whilst she spoke, with the triumphant feeling of having him in her power and giving him a severe blow, and yet with womanly compassion at the pain which she felt she was inflicting. But, to her surprise, Claude bore the stroke without shrinking. His face, indeed, was inexplicable; it expressed something very nearly akin to satisfaction, as he said lightly, "Why, Annette, where did you pick up that gossip?"

"You not believe it? but it is true. Do you see this letter?" And she drew forth the letter which she had that morning received. "It is from Wingfield, from a very dear friend; her sister lives with Mrs. Graham; so you see there can be no doubt. Look!" She pointed to a sentence. "It says, 'Miss Graham is to be married quite soon, but you are not to tell any one, for my sister would be very angry if she knew I had mentioned it; and she will not say the gentleman's name, but I shall certainly find out.' Who can doubt that?" added Annette, in a tone of exceeding irritation, caused evidently by finding that Claude persisted in appearing unmoved.

"Who wishes to doubt it?" he said, carelessly. "But, Annette, I advise you the next time that you have a secret committed to you, to be more careful how you betray it."

"Betray! I betray! I scorn it!" exclaimed Annette, her face becoming fiery with indignation. "But I say what I say to put young gentlemen on their guard. Miss Graham look very good, and keep up in a corner, and she never say nothing to no one; but she very deep."

"Possibly," said Claude, haughtily. "I have no wish to discuss Miss Graham. I advise you, Annette, to finish your commissions quickly, or you will not be at the hotel in time for Lady Augusta's dinner."

He walked away, and Annette stood at the door of the shop, watching him as he made his way through the narrow street of the Merceria and passed under the brilliantly painted clock tower into the Piazza of St. Mark; and then with a shrug of the shoulders, and the usual exclamation—"Ah! *qu'il est sot!*"—returned to complete her bargain with the Turkey merchant.

Claude wandered through the Piazza without in the least understanding its beauty. The delicate tracery of the arcades, the symmetry of the tall Campanile, even the gorgeous richness of the exterior of St. Mark's glittering with gold, marbles, and mosaics, were lost upon him. His eye, indeed, rested upon the

outward forms of the buildings; but his attention was entirely withdrawn from them, it was impossible to study them. He held a guide book in his hand, and read all that could be said of the history of the glorious cathedral, and looked, as he was told to do, at the gilt bronze horses, and the glittering gates, and the three pedestals from which rise the masts that once supported the banners of the republic; but it was all mechanical. Every figure which passed him suggested some thought of Helen; and every beauty which met his eye brought the longing that she could be at his side to admire it; and when the recollection of Susan, and of Annette's intelligence, fully confirmed by the observations he had himself made upon her agitation when receiving her letters, crossed his mind; it was with the thought of relief, that now he might be free, as he had once been, without any fear of exciting remark. He scarcely had understood till then the annoyance which Annette's impertinent hints had been to him, or the check they had continually placed upon his freedom of feeling and action. But all that was over. Susan had been his friend always, she would be so now more than ever. Unselfish and sympathising, she would never allow her own happiness to interfere with her feeling for others; and he might talk to her, and might learn from her every thing which he wished to know. Perhaps, even, he might so far enlist her on his side, as to induce her to say something which would have the effect of sounding Helen's feelings, and save him the misery and humiliation of a second refusal. He looked upon her as his guardian angel. He felt so sure of her affection for Helen, and her entire comprehension of himself, that at the moment he could have gone to her to acknowledge his every thought, and entreat her aid and counsel. Trust,—that was the one feeling which had for years been uppermost in his mind whenever he thought of Susan; and now, in the excitement, and distrust, and despondency of heart caused by the bitter remembrances of the past, it was increased tenfold. Claude found his way to the Piazzetta, threw himself into a gondola, and gave the direction to the Imperatore, and again, under the tranquillising influence of the smooth motion, grew calm, thankful, and hopeful.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

SUSAN's letter had occupied her till she was disturbed by Lady Hume's visit. It might have occupied her still longer if she had said all that it was in her heart to say; but it was hastily closed and given to Sir John, after a strict promise that he himself would put it into the post. It was addressed to Mrs. Graham.

"My dearest Mother,— We are at Venice. I can't tell you more than that; for I have just had your letter, and can think of nothing else. I can scarcely say how I feel, it is all so sudden and startling; but if you are satisfied, I must be. Tell my darling Isabella that if I had wings, I would leave Venice unseen only to have the pleasure of kissing her, and telling her how I long for her to be happy. I always thought Mr. George Berry liked her; but then I thought too that he liked all of us, and I confess that I had not the most remote idea of any thing serious. It must all have been managed since I left home, which appears an incredibly short space of time to have got up such an affair, as people say. You know my notion has always been that it would require to know a person for years before one could have a feeling approaching to love; but Isabella was always different from me, so I can't possibly judge; and I do think, truly and honestly, that she will be infinitely more happy married than she ever could have been unmarried. My dearest mother, I am sure this is not exuberant as it ought to be; Helen would tell me that I am dreadfully cold; but I can say any thing to you, and you will understand. I am so afraid of Bella's moods. I will tell you now what I never quite liked to tell you before, because it was only worrying and did no good. They have been the great drawback to all my happiness; they have given me a feeling of insecurity, of walking upon quicksands, even when I had you, my own, precious mother to fall back upon; and I am so afraid it may be the same now. I don't fancy that a man can understand and bear with such a temperament as a woman can; and I seem to wish so very much to know more of Mr. Berry. You say he is religious, and upright, and honourable; but I can't help fancying that underneath all your expressions of satisfaction, there is a slight misgiving. Do you think he knows Isabella? Does he see her truly? I wish I could talk to him about her; I feel I could put him in the way of managing her. Then, again, I feel

that to be obliged to manage a wife must be so trying. Do you remember the French saying, '*on n'a jamais de l'enthousiasme pour ceux que l'on ménage*'? Since you showed it to me it has always been in my mind when thinking of dear Isabella, and the possibility of her being married. But on the other hand, she will be so devoted and earnest in her duties, it must come right. My own mother, please write to me and tell me that you are sure of it. I long so inexpressibly for your word; nothing else will satisfy me, and my head grows quite dizzy with thought. More and more I feel that, if I could see Bella and Anna happy, and Charlie doing well, I could bear any thing which might come to myself. That sounds very melancholy, as if I were not enjoying myself; but I am, more than I can always understand or express. It is a new life here; nothing seems real to me. Perhaps it may be the effect of these watery streets, the sense of instability, which living on the sea gives; but even before we arrived here, I had a strange difficulty in realising my own happiness,—the sensation of walking in a dream. I have actually felt my pulse, to be quite sure that I was a living, substantial being; and now I look at the houses opposite, and could fancy that they would vanish before my eyes. But it is all bright, warm, exhilarating;—perfect, when I don't think; and I am learning to give up thought. Whom could I say this to except you, who know every feeling that rises in my heart, and can interpret my words exactly according to their true meaning?

"I shall write again in a very few days. We are at the Imperatore, just opposite the Foscari Palace. I have seen nothing yet, except the view from the windows, and the glimpses of the city last night, when we entered late. It was all exquisite. One feeling I have this morning akin to disappointment. The houses look poverty-stricken; I was not prepared for that; but I can't judge till I have seen more. Lady Hume, who is here, has just called, and offered to take me out. Lady Augusta is better, in a way; I am not sanguine about any permanent amendment. Poor Helen flatters herself that things will be better now we are at rest; we have had many trials on the journey, which I must wait till we meet to tell you. Mr. Egerton is here with us; he joined us at Conegliano (where Sir Henry met with an accident, not very serious, but very inconvenient; he hurt his foot by slipping down some steps); and being helpless, Mr. Egerton offered to come with us, and take care of us. He is the greatest possible comfort to Sir Henry. I don't know how long he stays. I have so very much to say, this all seems nothing. I

can't give descriptions, and perhaps you would not care to have them; and Isabella will be too happy to think of them; and Anna must learn patience, and she shall hear every thing when we meet. Would you believe it, that even now, at Venice, I long for that more than for any thing? It must be because I am growing old that I can't throw myself into enjoyment as I used to do. One thing always sad to me is Helen. She is so blighted and crushed; and I can scarcely tell why she should be, except that she has exhausted so much excitement in such a short time. We scarcely ever talk of the past; I have seen her shudder at Captain Mordaunt's name, and Madame Reinhard is a forbidden topic by tacit consent. I suppose the farther one travels from a great danger the more frightful it appears. But Helen, I am sure, is entirely in earnest now, though she will scarcely acknowledge it; I think she would feel more confidence in herself if she had fewer cares for Lady Augusta. She is one of those persons who, I always fancy, require a southern climate, moral and mental, to enable them to bring the good that is in them to perfection. This she certainly has not now.

"But this is very presumptuous in me; and I have kept Lady Hume waiting, and can only send ten thousand loves to you all. My own precious mother, when I am writing to you I always long for a new vocabulary of affection.

"Your ever loving and grateful child,
"S. G."

Venice is known by almost every one either by experience or description. The glories of St. Mark's have been portrayed, the impressive gloom of its red marble walls, the brightness of its golden mosaics, the antiquity of its worn, tessellated pavement. The Doge's Palace has been sketched, and painted, and engraved, and every line of its wonderful architecture brought clearly into view, and the impression of surpassing beauty which it gives carefully analysed. History and poetry have joined hand in hand to throw a charm over the minutest details of the humblest Venetian building, and to give romance to the most ordinary objects of daily life; things which in other cities would be passed by unnoticed are in Venice consecrated by association with all that is awful, mysterious, and exciting. And so it is that life in Venice, although made up of the same homely materials which are requisite for existence in other places, must always stand out apart, as something which can never be enjoyed elsewhere. The

events which occur to us may be the same ; but the feelings which they awaken must always be different.

Lady Hume, the most matter-of-fact of old ladies, took upon herself, most kindly and willingly, the office of chaperone. Her gondola was daily seen at the stairs before the court yard of the Imperatore ; and daily were parties formed for the *Academia*, or *St. Mark's*, or the *Piazza*, or the *Palace*, or perhaps for a visit to *Murano* or *Torcello*, or to some of the splendid but disappointing churches with which Venice abounds. It was a perpetual course of sight-seeing ; and nothing becomes, in general, more wearisome, after a time. But there is a charm in Venice independent of its sights—a luxury in the mere feeling of existence, a new and ever-present loveliness in the soft, watery colouring, and the rich, intricate, misty lines of the buildings which pass before the eye ; and day after day as Susan Graham glided along the *Grand Canal*, with Claude seated beside her, the feeling of deep, hidden delight increased. He was her constant companion now. It seemed quite natural that he should be the person to hand her into the gondola, and find a place next her. Sir John Hume took care of Helen, and Miss Hume and her sister engaged her in conversation ; and if, as was often the case, the party was too large to be together, Sir John, as a matter of course, insisted that Helen should come with him, and left Claude in charge of the rest. It was a very natural arrangement, a kind feeling on the part of Lady Hume, that Claude and Helen might, under the circumstances, feel more at their ease when separate ; and Claude, as it appeared, had no wish to alter it.

When with Susan, his whole tone and manner was that of being quite at rest with one who thoroughly understood him. It was not that they always talked much together ; at times they would sit so long silent as to awaken observation ; but whatever was said showed that quick, sympathising appreciation of each other's tastes which binds heart with heart more firmly far than words.

And on one subject Susan thought that she entirely comprehended Claude. They often spoke of Helen ; and it was a pleasure to her to be able to do so. It put her more at ease with him than any thing else could ; for it showed that even upon the point on which he had felt and suffered most keenly, he could open his mind to her. Claude, indeed, never referred directly to past events ; but he talked much and freely of all that had occurred in London ; he inquired minutely into the extent of Madame Reinhard's influence, and Helen's present feelings re-

specting her. He even went so far as to beg Susan to communicate to Helen some painful facts which had reached him, as to Madame Reinhard's domestic life, her open neglect of her husband, and the alienation between them, which was now so public as to cause her to be shunned by many persons who had before admitted her to their society. She was, he said, fast sinking to the level of the Baroness d'Olban ; her principles were working out their fatal effect ; and even if Helen had never openly separated from her, it would have been impossible to keep up the acquaintance. He told all this with what might have been the kind, protecting interest of a brother, desirous to know what effect the baneful influence exercised upon Helen's mind had produced. And Susan replied to him with equal simplicity and openness. In her anxiety to make him do justice to her cousin, she described to him the interview in which Helen's eyes were first opened to Madame Reinhard's conduct, and dwelt much upon the few words in which she had since expressed her unutterable thankfulness for having been saved from a marriage which must have been utterly fatal to her happiness. "Helen," she said, "looked back upon that time with a feeling far deeper than regret. It was a deep, sincere repentance, too sacred to be alluded to, but which was never absent from her mind ; and any person watching her daily life would see how the remembrance worked upon her." And then Susan went on to give little details of Helen's thoughtfulness and nobleness, the unselfishness which was a part of her natural character, but which had been hidden by worldly follies ; and at length she touched upon religion, and her countenance lighted up, and became almost beautiful, as she spoke of the quiet, unseen growth of feelings which Helen in her humility was almost afraid to acknowledge, but which were evinced by every action and every expression of taste or feeling. Some months before, Susan might have felt it an effort to say all this ; she might have remembered that Helen had once been very dear to Claude ; and a secret jealousy might have chilled her tones, and arrested the eager flow of her words. But that time was separated from the present as by a vast gulf. They were in Venice, living a new life amid new scenes, beneath the power of a new atmosphere ; and as the gondola floated along on its silent way, Susan looked at the past as she did upon the aerial outlines which rose up before her, and it became unreal and awoke neither hope nor fear, and she felt only that Claude had but one thought, one wish—for her.

At the close of the first week of their stay in Venice, Susan

spoke no longer in her letters of the feeling of insecurity, and the longing for home. The single drop of sadness in the fulness of her happiness was the recollection that they must separate.

And was every one else blinded? Did Venice, and its loveliness, and its associations so engross all attention that there was no thought for the living romance passing before the eye? Sir Henry and Lady Augusta for the most part stayed at home; or if, as happened at last when Sir Henry's lameness decreased, they sometimes joined the rest of the party, Claude was always bestowing his time and attention upon their comfort. Lady Hume did not understand love without the laughing, and talking, and badinage of flirtation; and the Miss Humes supposed that, because Claude and Susan were content to sit together sometimes for half an hour at a time without speaking, they considered each other dull companions. But there was one who saw all, and thought she understood all, and, with the firm energy of a heart which has voluntarily cast away a treasure that might have been its own, and knows that from henceforth it must be content to live without it, stifled every pang of regret which would have risen up to mar its peace, and soberly and thankfully accepted the contentment which was brought to it by the sight of another's joy.

One great and lingering grief to Helen had been the knowledge that she had rendered Claude miserable. She believed now that he was on the way to happiness; and her heart beat more lightly as she watched him talking to Susan, or heard him appeal to her on some question of taste, with the confident tone which showed that they were entirely of one mind. It seemed as though she were, in some degree, making amends to him for her former conduct, by furthering his wishes now; and it was often by her delicately-managed contrivance that Claude found himself left to take care of Susan in walking, as well as placed by her side in the gondola.

Poor Helen could live now only in self-sacrifice. It was a rest to her conscience,—the living evidence which she required to prove to herself that she was not utterly heartless; for when our faith in ourselves has once been thoroughly shaken, it requires a long, long time to restore it. We cannot trust our own hearts as others trust them; and much of the comfort of the self-imposed penances so often abused may probably be found, not in the hope of atoning for what has been wrong in the past, but simply in giving us confidence for the present.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

It was a deliciously warm morning, yet in no way overpowering, so as to render going out impossible; and it was very early, not later than seven. Helen and Susan were in a gondola, with Lady Hume's elderly German Abigail to act as chaperone. Annette could not be spared; and Helen was bent upon making a sketch of a very beautiful bit of the Doge's palace, as seen from one of the entrances to St. Mark's, and could only hope to do so by taking advantage of the comparatively quiet morning hours. Drawing was her constant employment and interest now; and perhaps none but Susan could appreciate the amount of self-control and power of will exercised in thus forcing herself into an occupation which had no definite aim nor external stimulus. In bygone days, Helen's drawing moods had been as variable as her temper, and she had believed that it was as impossible to control the one as the other; but she was learning by degrees that God intends us to discipline our minds by our tastes and inclinations as well as by our faults. The love of freedom, which had once been her temptation, was now becoming her great safeguard. Helen had known what it was to be her own slave; and now her whole heart was bent upon asserting that blessed freedom of will which, through God's grace, keeps in check even the passing humours and fancies to which so many, really in earnest in great matters, yield without repentance, and scarcely with regret. In Susan's eyes, she was more to be respected in the ceaseless watch kept over petty temptations to indolence, self-indulgence, and changeableness, than even in her untiring devotion to Lady Augusta, and the unselfish consideration which put every one before herself. Claude, Susan thought, could not see these temptations; and it was difficult to point them out to him without asserting a certain amount of superiority, as though she never gave way to them herself. But she did sometimes, laughingly, draw his attention to the fact that Helen was the only person of the party who could never afford to have an idle minute; and Claude, in his grave, abstracted way, would listen to what she said, and watch Helen for a few minutes, and perhaps even go up to the table at which she was drawing, and make some remark upon the sketch; but there was no excitement or eagerness in his manner. It was evidently a greater effort to speak to Helen than to talk even to Miss Hume; and so the drawing went on, no one particularly appear-

ing to care for it except Sir Henry ; and his was more a father's pride in his child's talent than the discriminating approbation of a person who really understood its worth.

"I shall finish my sketch this morning, I hope," said Helen, as she sat down by her cousin, and the gondola was pushed off from the steps ; "and then you and poor Louise may have a little longer rest in the morning. It makes me quite ashamed of myself to bring you out in this way, only that it is so intensely delicious."

"Every hour in Venice is a memory," said Susan ; "one would be ashamed of missing more than one is actually obliged. Just look, now, at that most exquisite bit of balcony, at the very top of the palace opposite, and the dingy old woman looking over it. All the Venetian history one could ever read would not realise the facts to one so much as that. I can notice these things, and think upon them when I am alone with you, in these quiet mornings ; but I don't know how it is, I do nothing but dream when we are all together."

"Do you dream?" said Helen ; and she sighed. "I wish I could ; but dreaming is over for me."

Susan took her hand affectionately. "Helen, dearest, I can't preach ; and it seems often as if I had no right to show sympathy ; can you understand that ? Just now, every thing is so bright to me."

Helen looked at her very earnestly. "When you are happy, Susan," she said, "you will never be selfish, as others are. When I was happy, I forgot every one but myself."

It seemed as if Susan would not trust herself to understand what might be in her cousin's thoughts. She turned from the personal allusion, and spoke of her sister. "I had another letter from mamma yesterday," she said ; "and it has taken a great load off my mind. I feel sure that what I always hoped will really be the case. Isabella has no moods and fancies now, mamma says. Every thing is too real and important to admit of them."

"Because she loves," said Helen, thoughtfully. "Yes, that must make every thing real ! the little things must be so swallowed up in the great feeling."

"Mamma is not quite so sanguine as I am," continued Susan. "She tells me that she is perfectly satisfied for the present, and trusts to God for the future ; but her theory is, that when the excitement of feeling goes off, all the old faults will revive. One thing, however, I am quite sure of, that Isabella will be much better, even if she should not be much happier, married than unmarried."

"It must, I suppose, require strength of mind to be thoroughly good, and contented, and happy, unmarried," said Helen; "to be quite satisfied to go through the world alone."

Susan made no reply.

"Don't you think so?" continued Helen.

Susan's face was flushed with eagerness, and then pale with some sudden revulsion of feeling, as she answered, "I don't know; I thought I could be so once."

"I am trying to make up my mind and to train myself for it," said Helen, more lightly. "One thing I have resolved upon; I will never be a useless, idle, gossiping old maid. I am not quite sure, though, as to being a useful aunt. I have rather a horror of that; but I don't make vows upon the subject; for if I do, I shall infallibly break them. Maurice must promise, however, to marry a person whom I approve."

"I don't think I could be happy in merely being any *one* thing," said Susan. "I mean I should like to look upon my condition, whatever it may be, on all sides, and so embrace it fully and heartily. I used to fancy that I never could be satisfied, unless I regarded old maidism, in a certain way, as a profession; but I may be wrong; I can't say." And she bent over the side of the gondola, dipping her parasol in the water.

Helen sat in thought for some seconds; then she said, gravely, "I should like to be taught by you, Susan. You would have made a better old maid than I shall ever be."

"God places us where it is best," said Susan, without raising herself up; "so, Helen dear, if we are to be old maids, I suppose there can be no doubt that it is the right state for us."

"Yes," said Helen! "but some endure their condition; others, as you say, accept it, and make use of it; that is what I should wish to do, but what I never shall do."

"You don't know yourself," said Susan, hastily. The tone of her voice betrayed that the subject was painful.

"Do we land here, ladies?" said Louise, pointing to the Piazzetta, and bending forward from the back seat where she had been attentively studying the book which on these morning excursions she always carried with her.

"No, not here. On a little farther—till we wish to turn," exclaimed Helen to the gondoliers; and the slender boat glided on its course again, and Helen, addressing Susan, said, "the drawing will wait; it is too delicious to land."

Susan neither acquiesced nor objected; she seemed lost in thought.

Helen glanced beneath her cousin's bonnet, as her head was partly turned aside, and saw the working of some secret, intense feeling, which even Susan's wonderful powers of self-command were unable thoroughly to subdue.

"Will you tell me what it is you are thinking of?" she said, in a low and gentle voice; "can I help you?"

Susan paused, then answered, calmly, "I was thinking of the difference between what we imagine we can do at one time, and what we feel we can do at another. I have had fancies about an unmarried life; but they are only fancies, I hate myself for them."

"Nay, why hate yourself?" exclaimed Helen;—"if they were good,——"

"They were unreal, self-deceiving."

"For you, possibly," said Helen; "because you may have a different lot appointed you; but they may help others; they may be useful to me."

Susan smiled faintly. "I thought they would be useful to myself," she said. "It was the prophecy about me from childhood, that I should be an old maid. I remember one of the servants telling me so in the nursery, because I was so particular in putting away all my playthings in the same order. People don't know how those chance words work upon children. I have spent hours in thinking what I would do, when I was left alone, never realising to myself what being left alone meant. And I have been enthusiastic, that is, you know, as far as I have ever been so about any thing, in my notions of the life I would lead, and the spirit I would throw into it."

"And don't you feel the same now?" said Helen, mournfully.

Susan hesitated; her hands were tightly pressed together as she said, "In reason, I think the same as ever."

They were both silent; and the gondola went on its smooth way, whilst the few soft sounds of the noiseless city were borne faintly to their ear as they passed the Guidecca and San Giorgio, and entered the more open channels of the Lagune.

Then Susan spoke as from the fulness of an earnest and saddened spirit: "I thought once—I think now—that there is but one way of viewing life, which can make it any thing but a horrible mystery, a conscious insanity; and that is to take it as we are told in the Bible, simply and literally as a place of education, a school for eternity. And when I thought that, Helen, it seemed to me that all these questions of love and marriage, and the interests which belong to them, were merely accidents, different forms of probation and discipline, which might or might not be

good, but which could in no way really affect the great question of hereafter ; and so I put them from me. And I felt that, if I could but take my life in whatever form it might be presented to me, with a full, deep, most perfect and entire dedication of myself to God, to work for Him, to train myself as He wills, to give up every thought of personal, individual happiness, and live as it were solely in the happiness of others, then my heart would have rest. I thought that I should be able to take the day as it might come, without a care for the morrow ; that I should be comforted by earthly love, but that I should never be dependent upon it—so dependent, I mean, as to feel that existence could not be borne without it ; and I believed that if a single life were my portion, I should be able to give my highest affection to God, and satisfy my craving for human love by expending my feelings upon many, instead of concentrating them upon one. That was my dream, Helen ; it made me very contented, very happy. I felt that loneliness then would be but another word for unselfishness, sympathy, self-devotion, and that which is highest, and dearest, and best of all, the heavenly love which has no need to fear a rival. And so, instead of shrinking from the prospect of an unmarried life, I was rather thankful when I believed it might be my appointed lot."

"And is it all gone now ?" said Helen ; and her voice trembled.

"Not gone," exclaimed Susan ; "no, not gone." But there was something, in the accent with which the words were uttered, that made Helen feel she dared not ask a further explanation.

She took out her sketch-book and made a few lines, giving an idea of the churches of the Redentore and San Giorgio as they now appeared in the haze of distance ; and the action served to recall Susan's thoughts.

"It is very well to enjoy ourselves in this way," she said ; "but it was not what we came out for, and Sir Henry will be disappointed if he finds the drawing no more advanced than it was yesterday."

Helen gave the order to the gondolier. She did not wish to go farther ; for she felt that the conversation was from some cause stopped, and Susan, with all her gentleness, was not a person who could ever permit her inmost thoughts to be fathomed against her will, even if Helen had been inclined to make the attempt.

They landed on the Piazzetta ; and Louise made a purchase of some figs, and then stationed herself as Helen's guardian in front of one of the side entrances to St. Mark's, whilst Susan, as was her wont, went into the church.

It was by far the most satisfactory time for the enjoyment of the glorious cathedral. A few scattered worshippers were kneeling here and there upon the worn pavement, and occasionally a priest was to be seen going from one to the other and collecting alms; but there were no sight-seers, no curious gazers. The attention was neither directed to the details of the mosaics, nor to the strange patterns upon the pavement; even admiration was not called forth, but only an awe-struck sense of the mystery and solemnity of the gloomy shadows which veiled every thing painful and jarring, and the rich completeness of colouring which seemed to fill the building with a tinted atmosphere. Susan's heart was very full that morning; but it was neither with joy nor sorrow, but with that vivid sense of existence, that consciousness of life, its powers of happiness, and its capacity for suffering, which, if it were continued, must, it would seem, wear away, merely by the pressure of overpowering sensation, the frail bond which unites body and soul together.

There is but one relief for that state of feeling, — quietness in the presence of God; and the weight of thought passed from Susan's heart, and its beating became more calm, as she prayed alone in the grand old church, knowing that she was close to One who understood all, and could interpret all her needs, who knew her weakness far better than she knew it herself, and who would bear her through happiness or grief safe over "the waves of this troublesome world to the land of everlasting life."

She returned again to Helen, and found a number of boys collected, whom Louise, with her wretched Germanised Italian, was endeavouring to send away. Helen herself bore their presence quietly, only now and then turning with sudden fierceness to startle some particularly bold intruder.

"*Via! via!*" and Helen, without looking round, tapped with her pencil the fingers of an impertinent urchin, who had actually put his hand upon her shoulder in his eager curiosity.

"*Inglese!*" was murmured amongst the crowd; and there was a sudden lull, whilst Susan, stooping down, whispered, "There is an English gentleman just come, who is sketching likewise; he will keep them in order."

But Helen seemed less disturbed by the Italian boys, than by a stranger from her own country, and, taking out her watch, observed that it was late, and they must be going home.

She folded up her camp-seat, put away her sketch-book, and collected her pencils.

Susan glanced at the English stranger. "A most unpleasant-

looking man," she said; "so excessively slang! I am thankful he was not here before."

"It is too provoking," observed Helen, a little petulantly; "when I calculated upon having the place to myself. I suppose he will be here to-morrow."

"There are some more people coming," continued Susan. "They all seem to belong to the gentleman. How loudly they talk! really one is ashamed of one's country."

Susan's indignation was certainly quite justified. The party who had now joined the artist, were of that peculiar stamp, unfortunately too often to be met with abroad, who seem only bent upon showing that English gentlemen, when relieved from the restraints of society, can cease to be gentlemen; and English ladies almost forget that they are women. Their loud laughter, self-conscious, flippant badinage, and uncomfortable freedom of manner made Helen quicken her movements; and even Louise, though not at all understanding what was said, seemed to think it necessary to stand behind her two young ladies, so as to screen them from observation.

"If you wait, he will ask to see the sketch," whispered Susan. "He is just the sort of man who would." And the idea made poor Helen so nervous that all her drawing materials fell to the ground.

A laugh, hard, coarse, and satirical, followed the accident; and the ladies of the artist's party drew near the spot.

Susan was nearer to them than Helen. She heard some one say, "Madame la Baronne." The voice struck her as one she ought to recognise. She gave a timid glance round, changed colour, and, putting her arm within Helen's, said, "We will leave Louise to bring the things; we shall be better at the Piazzetta," and drew her cousin away.

Helen was thoroughly annoyed: her sensitiveness to any thing in the most remote degree approaching to impertinence or vulgarity was almost a weakness. She seated herself in the gondola, and, with a flushed cheek and glistening eye, said, "Good-bye to my sketch; I shall never try that again."

Susan made no reply for an instant; then she said, quietly, "I am glad you did not see. It was the Baroness d'Olban and —" she paused, — "Madame Reinhard."

Helen started, so that Louise exclaimed, in fear. Grasping Susan's hand, whilst her face became deadly pale, she said, in a low voice, "It was an instinct; I felt something was wrong. Oh! Susan, I can't stay here."

"She will not come in our way," replied Susan; "and you would not speak if she did."

"But to see her, to know even that it is possible! Susan, you can never understand the harm she did me; the fearful, cruel harm. I feel it now; I shall feel it to my dying day. Nothing has been the same to me since I knew her. I can never be what I might have been if I had never known her. Beg papa to go — speak for me — tell him he must."

"You forget that you might have met in London — that it was merely accidental that you have not done so," said Susan, in a soothing but determined tone, and still holding Helen's trembling hand.

"I won't think about London; I wish only to do what I can now; and she will bring it all back to me, — the fear, the recollection of what I should have been if I had listened to her; oh, so miserable! so miserable! I don't think I saw it at the time; not as I see it now, I am sure. To have been the wife of that man, — not loving him — despising him! Susan, I can't be good where she is."

"We must find out something about her," said Susan; "perhaps she may only be here for a few days. We will ask Mr. Egerton to inquire."

Helen interrupted her. "Claude! oh, no! no! I could not bear him to be told. Yet he must know all," she added, in a lower tone; "he can't think worse of me than he does."

"You exaggerate, dearest," said Susan. "No one would say that you had done any thing so shocking as you seem to fancy."

"Because no one knows me as I know myself," replied Helen.

"Susan, there is not any human being who can tell the influence which Madame Reinhard's principles had over my mind. I hid them from myself in a veil of words, and would not allow myself to look at them as they really were; but I can see now plainly, as if written by a sunbeam, that they were obliterating all distinctions of right and wrong. I know that I was actually learning to forget that there was such a distinction; I would never have believed it if I had not experienced it. But, looking back at the things which I then praised, — the people whom I admired, — I can see that I might have been led into any evil, simply because I was taught to shut my eyes to the fact that it was evil. And I loved her dearly; I thought her so perfect! Oh, Susan! don't ask me to see her again." And poor Helen hid her face in her hands, and again repeated, "I loved her so dearly!"

"We will take care; don't trouble yourself about it; leave it

to me," said Susan, tenderly. "Look, we are at the Imperatore ; you must not be unhappy now, or Lady Augusta will be uneasy."

Helen raised her sad eyes to her cousin's, and answered, "I must be unhappy ; but no one shall know it. Only, Susan," — her voice faltered, — "don't let Claude speak to me about her."

CHAPTER LXXX.

"WELL, Helen, my darling ! what success this morning ?" Sir Henry, who had only for the last few mornings been able to appear at breakfast at half-past nine, put out his hand eagerly for the sketch-book in the good humoured manner of one who is contented with himself, and determined to be contented with others.

Helen hung back. "It has been rather an unsatisfactory morning ; I have not done much. We were tempted to row on a little beyond the Piazzetta, and then — we were interrupted."

She looked to Susan for assistance.

"We were hurried away by some tiresome people who would come and sketch too," continued Susan. "I suppose they had as much right as ourselves, strictly speaking ; but they were noisy and disagreeable."

Sir Henry's temper rose in a moment. "Disagreeable ! I won't have you go again ; I will go with you myself. The English abroad are detestable. There ought to be a law allowing only certain people to travel. But I will go with you myself ; I want to have some more sketches. I must have one of the San Gior-
gio ; and I am getting quite right again."

"We should be rather too early for you, I am afraid," said Helen, gently ; "and, later in the day, the Piazza would be too crowded."

"We will manage it, — we will do something. Where is Claude this morning ?" Sir Henry glanced impatiently round the room.

Annette, who had just entered with Lady Augusta, replied that Monsieur Egerton was gone out ; she believed he meant to inquire at the post office for letters.

"I don't want letters," exclaimed Sir Henry ; "we are doing very well as we are here ; I don't want to be reminded that we must go away. Augusta, my dear, you have no fancy for leaving Venice, have you ?"

Rather an unfortunate question, considering that Lady Augusta

had only five minutes before been venting a fit of the old restlessness upon Annette.

Annette took upon herself to reply. Miladi, she said, was not so well; she did not think Venice agreed with her; it was too damp.

Poor Sir Henry was discomfited; but Susan soothed him by saying, cheerfully, that up to this point Venice had certainly agreed wonderfully well with Lady Augusta; whilst Helen, with a scarcely audible sigh, occupied herself with the usual thoughtful attentions, which now commonly had the effect of driving away, at least for a time, Lady Augusta's moods.

Breakfast began rather silently; in the middle Claude entered. He had his own letters in his hand; but there were none for any one else. Helen seemed indifferent, Sir Henry rather pleased. Susan was disappointed, and said so.

"We shall expect our English news from you, Claude," said Sir Henry. "Is Buckingham Palace burnt down yet? is London in insurrection? and what are our prospects for the next session? Come man, tell us. Any hope of a change of ministry?"

"My letters are from Helmsley," said Claude, "from my bailiff chiefly. I am afraid they would not be interesting to the company at large."

Lady Augusta caught the name Helmsley, and asked, with a most unfortunate association of ideas, whether Kate Hope was there still?

Helen's face became rigid; but Claude answered quietly, yes, she was doing very well. His housekeeper had made her a very useful person. "Can I say any thing to her for you?" he added, addressing Susan; "I shall see her probably before long."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow," exclaimed Sir Henry; "you talk as if you had one foot in the carriage—or the gondola, I suppose I must say in Venice,—and were wishing us good-bye. We have a fortnight before us still for Italy, whether we spend it here or at Milan."

"I am afraid it will not be my fortnight," replied Claude. "I ought to be in England now."

"In England! we must all go to England," exclaimed Lady Augusta. "I don't want to see Venice any more; I would much rather go home if Claude goes."

Susan and Helen were silent. Sir Henry said, a little fretfully, "You forget, my dear, that I have been tied by the leg to that wearisome sofa ever since we have been here. I must see something of Venice before we turn homewards. And there is Milan

too; I had set my heart upon the girls seeing the cathedral thoroughly. It is folly to talk of going home, when we are only just settled. Come, Claude, eat your breakfast, and then we'll decide what is to be done for the day. I feel like a boy set free from school, now that I can move about without hopping like a lame frog from room to room."

"I fear that is precisely the reason why I must be like a boy summoned back to school," said Claude. "I have been playing truant too long; and if you can do without me, I shall have an unquiet conscience, and be very disagreeable, if I stay."

"Just put conscience in your pocket for once, my dear fellow," exclaimed Sir Henry; "it's what all English people do when they come abroad. Take my word for it, you are a great deal too strait-laced. You know I always found fault with you about it when you were a boy. I verily believe people may die of an enlargement of the conscience, just as well as they may of an enlargement of the heart."

"Perhaps I agree with you," said Claude, laughing; "but I never found yet that my conscience had attained its full natural growth; so I am not much afraid of dying of its enlargement. You must remember that I gave myself five weeks for my tour when I left England, and the five weeks are nearly over."

"Five weeks! it's not breathing-time for a man who works like a dray-horse, as you do all the year round. It might be very well for a lazy old stager like myself, who has learnt to think that the young horses can draw the waggon without his aid, and so does not trouble himself to carry more than his own weight. But for you — why Hume told me you would have broken down, he was sure, if he had not forced you away."

"I was rather worn," said Claude, gravely; "but it was not from work only."

There was an uncomfortable pause, interrupted by another question from Lady Augusta: "Claude, did Kate Hope help to make the new furniture for Helmsley?"

"Some of it." And Claude turned to Susan, and begged for another cup of coffee.

"The drawing-room chintz was a very handsome pattern," said Lady Augusta.

Sir Henry had failed to catch the awkward train of ideas, upon which Lady Augusta so unfortunately lingered; but he could not help seeing, from the countenances round the table, that something was wrong. Seizing upon the first thought which presented itself, he said, "You have a capital bailiff at Helmsley,

Hume tells me ; so there can be no reason for your hurrying away in this fashion, and leaving us in the lurch. Besides, I thought you were going to wait here till Hume and his boy joined you."

"George Hume is not so well," replied Claude ; "and there is some idea of his staying in Italy for the winter. That, of course, would make my joining them out of the question. But if I were to leave Venice at once, I should meet them at Verona, and have a day or two with them there ; and then I might rush home as fast as I liked."

"Still bent upon rushing home," exclaimed Sir Henry. "One would think you were prime minister."

"I am prime minister in my own domains," said Claude. "I appeal to Miss Graham ;" and he changed his tone, and smiled as he spoke. "I am sure I shall have support from her. My bailiff writes me word that the work I left him is at a stand-still, for want of my presence. He says that questions arise every day which he does not feel he has authority to decide, and he respectfully hints that if English gentlemen spend half the year in London, making laws for the nation, they ought to spend the other half on their own estates, making laws for their own people. Now what can be said ? what would you say ?"

"That you should go," said Susan, firmly, without the least change in her voice ; but the next moment, her head was bent down, and the empty coffee cup raised to her lips.

"I should like to see the new furniture at Helmsley, very much," murmured Lady Augusta ; but Claude, usually so courteously attentive to her least observation, now entirely disregarded it. He looked at Susan kindly and gratefully, and there was a peculiar tone of affectionate confidence, remarked even by Sir Henry, in his words, "Thank you ; I can always depend upon you for helping me to do right."

"Not very complimentary to us ; eh, Helen ?" exclaimed Sir Henry, hastily ; and poor Helen's voice seemed nearly choked, as she tried to answer lightly and evasively, "Susan was always famous for making people do their duty."

Sir Henry, though he was not quite aware of the feeling, was a little "put out," and fancied Helen neglected ; and by way of saying something which should make her feel that he at least thought a good deal of her, he told her to bring her sketch that he might look at it again ; it seemed to him capital, and if they were all going to rush to England in this sudden way, she must make haste and finish it.

"I can manage to work it up from what I have done," said

Helen, quickly; "I don't want to sketch any more." She was afraid that Sir Henry, in his thoughtless way, would ask Claude to go with them on some future occasion. He very often did things of this kind merely from obtuseness. He was so accustomed now to see Claude with them, that he was falling back into the pleasant, easy feeling of former days, only rendered yet more easy by the knowledge, half provoking, half satisfactory, that Claude could never be any thing to Helen, she did not like him. If he cared for any one now, it was for Susan Graham.

Helen brought her sketch, and Claude praised it, but too coldly to satisfy Sir Henry; for he pointed out a defect in the perspective, and doubted whether some particular part of the tracery could be correctly drawn.

Helen stood by and listened, and owned he might be right; but when Sir Henry declared that they would all go the very next morning to the place, and Claude should correct the sketch himself, if he fancied he knew so much better about it than any one else, she said, in a very decided way, that she had no intention of going to St. Mark's again so early; she must make the best that she could of her sketch at home.

"What! not frightened away by those noisy people?" exclaimed Sir Henry.

Claude turned round directly, to inquire what was meant; and Lady Augusta said, in a plaintive voice: "I always thought it was dangerous for them to go out alone, and Lady Hume's maid doesn't understand a word of English."

"There was no danger, — nothing to fear," said Susan, seeing by the peculiar rigidity of Helen's face that a whole torrent of excited feelings was working underneath; "it was simply disagreeable. There was rather a noisy party in the Piazza this morning," she added, speaking to Claude; "and a gentleman was sketching there, so we did not have the place to ourselves as we have had before. It was of no real consequence; Helen had just finished; but I am afraid they will be likely to be there again to-morrow."

Helen had been fastening up her sketch-book. She laid it down now on the table, and said, very earnestly: "I have done as much as I shall ever wish to do; and, dear papa, as we can't have many more days in Venice, you must not waste your time upon me, but go about with Susan and see all you can."

"And why not with you, my child? What's the matter? I don't understand." Helen changed colour rapidly, and her hand trembled, and Sir Henry took hold of it anxiously, and said: "I

am sure there is more in this than you will say. Those people were rude;—tell me;—I must know.”

“Oh! no; indeed, no.” Helen looked at her cousin to explain; and with the conviction that mystery would only make the awkwardness greater, Susan said at once: “We did not speak to them, nor they to us, but they were not all strangers to us; by sight at least. The Baroness d’Olban was one, and—Madame Reinhard.”

“That woman! that audacious humbug in Venice!” Sir Henry laid his hand fondly upon Helen’s head. She had sat down, and was resting it upon her hand.

Claude said, in a low, marked tone: “I heard this morning that they were in Venice.”

“They are not English. Thank Heaven, they are not English!” exclaimed Sir Henry.

“Only I am afraid they have been allowed to form part of our English society,” said Claude, in the same strained, uncomfortable manner.

“Such fools we are to believe in them!” exclaimed Sir Henry. “So they are all here, are they?—Monsieur le Baron, and Madame la Baronne, and Herr Reinhard, and—what is the German for Madame?”

“Madame Reinhard does not trouble her husband to accompany her,” said Claude, sternly: “they are separated.”

Helen burst into an agony of tears, and rushed from the room.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

HELEN and Claude met no more on that day. A party was formed for the Academia and the Lido; but Helen, shut up in her own apartment, her head throbbing with pain, her eyelids swollen with tears, and her heart heavy with its burden of sorrowful and repentant thought, declined all entreaty to accompany them. When they were gone she came into the salon, and read, and talked, to Lady Augusta; but the sound of a footstep or a voice, drove her back again to solitude. It is terrible, even to the most indifferent, to read in the fate of others what, but for God’s mercy and protecting providence, might, in all human probability, have been their own. The very feeling of present safety brings out in powerful contrast the danger that has been escaped. The seaman, saved from shipwreck, shudders more at the recollection of his

peril when he stands firmly on dry land, and sees his comrades borne to destruction, than when he was himself buffeting with the waves; and the heart saved from the shipwreck of pure and holy principle, realises the horror of its once dangerous position with an infinitely keener anguish, when, humbly clinging to God for help, it watches to the close the career of those with whom it once sympathised, than even at the moment of its first awakening to a consciousness of sin, its guilt, and its consequences. There had been much of personal feeling,—pride, disappointment, and a sense of injured dignity, in Helen's indignation when she opened her eyes to the fact of Madame Reinhard's insincerity. She was angry with her, and knew that the anger was justifiable; and this feeling hid from her, for a time, her own share in the evil which she condemned. But the perception had grown and deepened since then. Lady Augusta's illness, the anxiety and self-reproach which it caused, had sown the seed of self-knowledge; and as Helen strove, day by day, to read her own heart more truly, and serve God more perfectly, so did the veil vanish from the past, and it stood out clearly in its shame and peril.

Madame Reinhard's career might have been hers: what was there to prevent it? She had imbibed the same principles, and, as far as in her lay, carried them out to the same extent. Wilfully and knowingly, seeking only the gratification of a wild, untamed spirit of independence, she had accepted a man whom she despised; so had Madame Reinhard. Putting aside the consideration of the sacred promise to be made before God, that she would devote herself to the happiness of her husband, she had chosen to look upon him only as the means by which she might obtain a certain amount of worldly independence and enjoyment; so had Madame Reinhard. Self had been her object; and self, also, had been Madame Reinhard's. When two persons set out together on the same dangerous path, and follow it in its devious windings, and never pause to look back at the point from which they started, or the goal to which they are tending, who is to say that the Hand of God will be interposed to save one from the precipice in which it ends, while the other is allowed to rush on madly to destruction?

Helen did not condemn Madame Reinhard, sunk though she was even in the eyes of the world. She only prayed for her; and, in praying for her, she prayed also for herself, to be forgiven, strengthened, guided; to be inspired with a spirit of watchfulness and self-distrust; to be made contented under whatever cross should be in store for her; to be taught to live for the happiness

of others, as she had once lived only for herself. Helen's prayers had been very earnest of late: they were never so earnest as on that long and sorrowful day.

And Susan in the mean time was happy, unconsciously yet fully happy, even though Claude still spoke of departure: and the words, "We must see what we can to-day, for to-morrow will have other engagements," were sounded in her ear from hour to hour, as though to remind her of the knell which must sooner or later be tolled for all human joys.

Claude lingered by her side, devoted himself to her in word and action: seemed unable, except by an effort, to separate himself from her, even to pay those necessary attentions to the rest of the party which in his most abstracted moments he never forgot. True he spoke of Helen, anxiously, with deep interest, which could not be distrusted; but it was the watchful interest of doubt, not the calm confidence of sympathy, with which he addressed himself to her. He talked for the first time of the days of his past happiness, and seemed desirous to explain his feelings, and to show how his love for Helen had first sprung up. His mind, indeed, rested upon that period, more than upon the present. If in any way this was alluded to, it was evident that it pained him. He looked upon Helen, apparently, as suffering for her former follies, and felt for her, and was inclined to blame himself for having in any way done her harm by his impatience and exacting temper. He had learnt wisdom, he said, since then: his danger now would be that of over-caution: what he should most require would be the absolute certainty that his affection was returned: and how was that to be obtained? and as his eyes met Susan's their glance seemed to demand from her the assurance which his lips could not venture to ask.

So passed the morning at the Academia, and Susan dwelt with a fresh and untold delight upon the beauty before her, for every sense was quickened by the enjoyment of a perfect sympathy. She had visited it often before, and now she could bear to leave much unnoticed, and give herself up to the contemplation of her peculiar favourites: Titian's wonderful "Assumption of the blessed Virgin; and her presentation in the Temple," and the famed "Paris Bordone," which tells one of the most striking incidents in Venetian history; and, perhaps better than all, the exquisite drawings by Leonardo da Vinci and his pupil Luini, which seem to embody, even more than the designs of Raphael, the spirit of purity and unearthly holiness.

The Armenian Convent and the Lido were reserved for the

evening. It was a particular request made by Claude. The gaiety of the Piazza, he said, was distasteful to him, and he wanted his last associations with Venice to be those of quietness and repose. It was the first regular announcement which he had made that his mind was fully made up upon the subject of departure. Sir Henry, subject himself to momentary fits of what he called Quixotic duty, had supposed that Claude's resolutions were of the same character; and when they were not talked about he thought they were forgotten. But he knew little of the iron rule which a mind like that of Claude exercises over itself at all moments. There was no neutral ground with him between duty and inclination. Either a thing was right to be done, or it was not: and throughout the whole of that busy day, whilst engrossed apparently in present objects, there was an under current of conflicting feeling in Claude's mind, a struggle between the strong will to remain and the duty which bade him depart, to which every word and action unconsciously had reference.

But he had decided, and had found rest. Once before, carried away by feeling, he had cast the die too soon, and the end had been fatal to his happiness. Now it seemed that a warning voice had been sent, to guard him against the same danger, and on his own head would be the consequences if he chose to turn a deaf ear to it.

There was a duty which called upon him to go; not, perhaps, obviously imperative, and one which a less honest conscience might easily have put aside; but still unquestionably a duty, if there was nothing to oppose it. That was sufficient for Claude. His arrangements were made so as to excite no further discussion, and whilst waiting for the arrival of Lady Hume's party, before setting out for the Armenian Convent, he announced to Lady Augusta that he must proceed the next day to Verona. Helen was not in the room when he said it; perhaps he might have found it more difficult to state his intentions if she had been. But Susan came to his aid, and with gentle and judicious tact managed to divert Lady Augusta's thoughts from the annoyance of Claude's departure to the prospect of soon meeting again in England.

"It is but a short time," she said; "we shall all, we hope, be at home again before very long, and then it will be such a pleasure to meet, and tell all that has been done and seen."

The observation seemed so simple and natural that Claude, who was looking at Lady Augusta, was not at all struck by it; and did not remark any change of voice. But he felt grateful to Susan, and replied very cordially, that he should look forward to

that more than to any thing; he could not say how different his recollections of his tour would be now, from what they would have been if he had not spent this happy fortnight in Venice.

"And it is to be the last night," said Lady Augusta, mournfully. "They won't see any thing, or go anywhere when you are gone, Claude; and I dare say Sir Henry's foot will become bad again; and Helen and Susan can't go about together. I want Helen to go out this evening; I shan't go, and Helen wants change. I wish she would go; I wonder why she keeps to her room; she never used to do it. I don't like it; I don't think she is well. Susan, why don't you make her come here? She must say good-bye to Claude."

Susan glanced at Claude uneasily. There was more excitement and incoherency in Lady Augusta's speech and manner than she had lately remarked. Claude was inclined to regret his determination.

"Helen ought to come and say good-bye," repeated Lady Augusta.

"But I am not going now," said Claude soothingly. "Even if I do leave Venice to-morrow, we shall be together again this evening. We are only going out for an hour or two."

"I don't think it is kind of Helen not to say good-bye," persisted Lady Augusta. "She always used to have fancies, and she is very unkind to Claude; it is very wrong of her."

Claude turned pale. There was no meaning in Lady Augusta's words, but they gave him a sensation of heart-sickness.

"I will call Helen," said Susan, perceiving that Lady Augusta's mind was not likely to be set right by words.

Claude made a movement as though he would have prevented her; then he sat down silently.

Susan and Helen came back together. Helen looked very worn and unhappy; so unhappy that she had no room for any other feeling. She was extremely cold in manner, and said to Claude that she was sorry to hear he talked of going, in a tone which had no accent of sorrow in it.

"You must wish Claude good-bye, Helen," said Lady Augusta, plaintively. "He is going to leave us. It is very unkind in you to say you won't be with him the last evening."

Claude's eyes were raised eagerly to Helen's face, and his lips moved, but his words were chilled by the stiff reply: "There are so many that I should be in the way; and I have a headache."

"Not in the way, indeed, Helen," exclaimed Susan.

"Yes, indeed, very much in the way." Helen tried to smile. "I hope you will have a very pleasant row. I shall make papa take me to the Lido another evening."

"It would do your head good if you would come with us," said Claude, gently.

"Thank you, no, I shall be better at home, and I shall go to bed early; probably before you return."

Susan went to the window. "The gondola is ready," she said; "Miss Hume is there: no one else. She will not come upstairs, I suppose."

"I may, perhaps, not see you again," said Claude, addressing Helen. "I think I shall be obliged to go early to-morrow." He spoke in a low voice, and almost as coldly as Helen herself, except that his eyes contradicted his lips.

Susan was moving Lady Augusta's chair, so that she might be able to see the gondola. She did not notice what was passing.

Helen's face expressed a conflict of bitter feeling. She replied to Claude's remark by giving him her icy hand, and saying: "Good-bye, I hope you will have a pleasant journey."

Claude answered nervously and eagerly: "I can't have a pleasant journey if I leave you unhappy."

"I deserve it all." The burning blush of shame crimsoned Helen's cheeks. She withdrew her hand hastily from Claude; uttered another cold good-bye, and left him.

Easy and soothing both to body and mind was that evening's gliding voyage through the winding channels intersecting the Lagune to the tiny island on which the Armenian fathers have fixed their habitation. It is a quiet and very tempting resting-place. The white walls of the convent rise immediately out of the water, which closes around them, willing, it would seem, to shut out all sounds but those of its own gentle but ceaseless plash. The small entrance court, surrounded by a cloistered walk, and having a bright garden in the centre, speaks of study and peaceful meditation. And there is a vineyard also, where clustering leaves and delicate tendrils form arcades to shelter the long green walks beneath them from the glare of the noonday sun; and a terrace from whence in the still summer evening the eye, weary with present objects, may turn to the buildings of Venice set in their watery frame, or wander across the Lagune to the shores of the mainland, and find a pleasure, renewed by every passing light or flickering shadow, in the misty outline of the glorious mountains of the Southern Tyrol.

It had all been seen. The courteous father who acted as guide

had displayed the treasures of the convent library, and the work of the printing-room, which is one of the chief occupations of the monks, and pointed out with proud delight the picture by Giovanni Bellino, which no sum of money would ever, he said, induce them to part with; and Claude and Susan again and again had found themselves walking apart, or lingering behind to examine some object of mutual interest, whilst both were silent,—both sad.

Once more they stopped in the little garden. The gondola was ready at the steps. Sir Henry pressed forward to place Miss Hume in it. The Armenian father accompanied them, and then returned to Susan. He gathered a rose, the last of the season, and presented it to her. It was full blown, and some of the petals fell to the ground.

Susan looked a little vexed. "I had wished to carry it home to Helen," she said to Claude.

"It should have been gathered sooner," he replied. "It has lived to be wasted."

The monk plucked another flower, and Susan accepted it gratefully; but she collected the remaining petals of her faded treasure, and as she laid them in her pocket-book, said, "I won't complain. It is a pleasant memory now; it would have been but a hope before."

Claude's countenance changed. "Yes," he said, quickly, "and a hope that might never have been fulfilled. You are right; memory is best." He walked on a few paces; then as they drew near the steps, he added, "and hopes plucked too soon leave only sad memories. It is better to be patient."

Susan's face was averted: he could not see its expression, neither could he feel the trembling of her hand as he assisted her into the gondola. He was thinking of other things; and bidding a kindly farewell to the courteous Armenian father, he took his seat in the boat, and rousing himself to exertion, addressed some light words to Miss Hume, and kept up an unbroken conversation with her until they landed upon the desolate shore.

Sir Henry was the first to leave the gondola. Bent upon showing his freedom and independence after his weary days of helplessness, he insisted upon taking care of Miss Hume, and rejected the idea of walking with his niece, for whom he professed a very high regard, but whom it so happened, he said, that he could see every day. So it was that, without intention on either side, Susan and Claude again found themselves walking alone and apart.

Very silent they were at first, as they passed the few poor

cottages containing the only inhabitants of the barren island, and slowly made their way along a raised path by the side of a narrow canal, the banks of which were planted with Indian corn. There was nothing in the scene to excite a remark, and nothing in their own hearts which at that moment admitted of inspection. Claude especially seemed wrapt in thought, anxious, and undecided. He had the look of a man wholly engaged in solving some painful, important problem of moral conduct. When Susan at length broke the silence, almost frightened by its continuance, he started, and spoke eagerly, even impatiently. "Stormy, did you say? Yes, it looks so. So much the better for the Adriatic;" and he hurried on.

"But it will be necessary for us to turn back, won't it?" said Susan, timidly.

"Not till we have seen it,—the clear, open sea,—all the rest is but a sham. Besides,"—he suddenly checked himself, and spoke more gently,— "I have something to say—I must say it now, if you will hear me. If I lose this moment I may have no other."

Susan's utterance was choked; but she quickened her pace. She had an indescribable longing to find herself again with her uncle and Miss Hume.

They appeared at that instant, returning from the sandy beach upon which they had looked for an instant, contented with saying that they had gazed from the Lido upon the Adriatic.

"Threatening!" said Sir Henry to Claude, as he buttoned his coat around him. "Quite a cold wind! I shall get back to the gondola. Don't stay till midnight, making verses upon the waves."

Susan spoke laughingly to Miss Hume, and asked her whether she had carried away some sand for a remembrance. Such a foolish question it was! But there are times when nonsense is more useful to us than sense.

Claude drew her on. The ground was rough, and he made her take his arm, but he did not speak for some moments.

They stood upon the Lido; the long waste of sand interrupted only by the few moss-grown tombs of the Jews, and the signs of a stunted and arid vegetation, washed by the angry waters of the wide, cheerless, Adriatic.

Then Claude said: "This is my last night. Must I go tomorrow without carrying hope with me? I ask you as a friend." And his gaze rested upon her with an earnestness which was agony.

Susan's eyes met his for one moment of silence, but they sank again instantly, and before a sound escaped her lips, he went on: "You know Helen perfectly; all she feels and thinks; she keeps nothing from you. You know me also—better than any one else knows me. If there is no hope, tell me."

A long pause followed. The answer came at last; very low, but calm and gentle, with all the tenderness of a woman's sympathy. "I think there is hope."

He spoke again. "A thousand blessings upon you for those words. But I am a coward. I wrecked my own happiness once, I dare not do it again. I leave my fate in your hands. When you tell me I may venture I will, but not before." He took her hand, and pressed it gratefully, affectionately, and still held it as he added: "You are afraid to speak; you think I have taken a liberty; that I am laying too much upon you."

Susan's voice never faltered, but her words were abrupt: "I will try."

"Thank you! oh! so much, so much! But I can never thank you sufficiently. I can never tell you what you have been to me; my one comfort and guiding star in this long, dreary time. I knew how it must be when you were with her: I was sure that your influence must make her what she is. And you will let me speak of yourself, too, now. You must not be angry if I say how it has gladdened me in the midst of all my suspense, to think that you were happy." He looked at her, expecting an answer; but no sound came save the swelling moan of the rolling waters seeking rest where there was none.

Claude changed the subject with self-reproach. He thought he had intruded too far. "I shall go now," he said, "comparatively happy. I shall feel that I leave a friend and advocate behind me. Perhaps in time she will learn from you to think of me—not as a hard master, always tutoring and advising, but as one who has learnt from her lessons of unselfishness and daily endurance, which could never have been taught otherwise. I will not ask you to say that you will work for me in my absence; I feel that trust is more binding than any promise."

It might have been an echo from the moss-grown sepulchres upon the shore, which answered, "I promise." And Claude drew Susan's arm again within his, and they turned away.

The Lido was left to its solitude; and the waves lifted their crests, and, as they dashed upon the beach, bore back with them the light sand upon which human feet had thought to rest as on a firm foundation; and no eye, save that of God, marked the

changes which they worked ; as no eye but His saw the destruction of the bright fabric of earthly joy which, in those few moments, had crumbled into dust beside the wild shores of the Adriatic.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE first faint tinge of autumn was gathering over the woods of Ivors. There was a gleam of brightness upon the light-spreading beeches in the park, a richer hue over the close-leaved elms and the jagged foliage of the gnarled oaks. Sunshine was more glowing, but shadows were deepening. The avenue had been cleared from the few leaves scattered by a late storm, the flower garden had been carefully put in order, and late geraniums and gorgeous dahlias gave a brilliancy of colouring to the somewhat faded aspect of the closely mown turf, scorched by a long and unusual summer drought.

Men were vigorously at work in the plantations ; women were weeding in different parts of the grounds ; there was an appearance of energy in the movements even of the lazy boy hired by the gardener out of charity, to help to move flower pots and put the walks of the kitchen garden in order, because Sir Henry Clare was to be at home immediately.

People said Sir Henry, not Lady Augusta, as they used to do. Those days of strict superintendence were over, and rumour, always eager with its fatal news, said that Lady Augusta was returning worse, instead of better ; that a cold, caught by some accidental exposure to night air, had partially brought back the fever which had first broken her down, and that it was no question of recovery with her now ; that she might live, but that life could never be enjoyment either to herself or her friends ; and that the most probable expectation was, that with her strength so weakened, she would sink rapidly in body as well as in mind.

The report might be exaggerated, but it was certain that all directions were given without reference to Lady Augusta, except that some few careful instructions were sent by Miss Clare as to the arrangement of the rooms which were specially appropriated to her use.

The butler and the footman were standing together at the front door, straining their eyes to look down the avenue. At the same

moment a gentleman was seen walking leisurely towards the house, and the butler, with an exclamation which showed that he was too proud to receive any but his own master, turned into the hall and left his companion to announce to Claude Egerton that Sir Henry was not yet arrived, but was expected every moment.

Claude entered, but stopped to ask more questions. "Sir Henry, you said. Is he coming alone? He wrote me word that I was to be here to meet the whole party."

"Oh no, sir! My Lady, and Miss Clare, and Miss Graham are all expected; that is, I believe Miss Graham goes to Wingfield to-night. A fly has been sent for her, as they don't pass through the town; and is waiting."

"Mrs. Graham is not here then?"

"No, sir,—no one. Will you go into the library? we have had a fire lighted there: we thought my Lady might be chilly." And Claude went to the library, and sat down in the arm-chair by the fire, and looked round the room and thought of other days.

That sameness in outward and inanimate things,—what a bitter mockery it presents to the changes in the circumstances and feelings of the living being! There was the room, unaltered, except that it had lost the appearance of being in constant use. The books were laid regularly in order, the pens were new, the inkstand was perfectly bright, and the chairs were placed symmetrically. There was not the comfortable look of business which had pervaded it in the days of Lady Augusta's health and strength. But the oval table in the window was still covered with pamphlets and papers, the large work-basket stood in its old place, and the Bohemian flower vase had been filled by the gardener with the best selection which his taste could make; and without there were the same trees and shrubs, only some a little increased in size, and the deep glades admitting the slanting sunset rays, and beyond them the heavy masses of wood, and the blue mist hanging over the distant town. Only the spirit was wanting; and how had that fled!

Claude went back in thought through many years. It seemed that he could trace now the course of Lady Augusta's life,—her principles and objects; they were so mixed up with his own, that, in thinking of her, he was thinking of himself; and at that moment, unselfish though he was, his own position, his own hopes and fears, claimed instinctively and peremptorily his full consideration. He dwelt upon the remembrance of his boyish visits to Ivors, the impression they had made upon him, his perception of Helen's faults, and the prejudice which had lingered in his mind in conse-

quence. He had judged her hardly then : looking back, he could see the germs of those noble qualities which trial, through God's grace, had since developed. But he had been repelled from the beginning, even when he did not understand his own feelings, by Lady Augusta's evident manœuvring. And then his mind recurred to that time of excitement, delusion, unreality which had followed; he could not explain it to himself or account for it. But he had the consciousness of having been led on, deceived, and of Helen's having been deceived likewise. Lady Augusta's interference had rendered them false to each other and to themselves; for Claude blamed himself as much as he was forced to blame Helen. He could see now his own blindness, — how he had lived in a world of shadows. His present feelings were quite different from those which had formerly so entranced him; so much calmer, so much more resigned to God's Will, even in this moment of wearying suspense. There had been a sense of insecurity then, even when his hopes were brightest. He had always feared to approach too near to Helen lest his eyes should be opened to the truth; he would not look at her as she was, and he had suffered the fatal consequences of his own wilful errors. Now he felt that he was treading upon firm ground; he had no misgiving, except as to the possibility of his affection being returned; and, as the pang of doubt was felt, Claude drew forth from his pocket-book a note in the handwriting of Susan Graham. It said: "You may be at Ivors; I think you will be happy. It is difficult to convince her that you can overlook the past; but I have made her feel that it is possible. When that barrier is removed her heart will be free, and you will say for yourself what no one can say for you."

"S. G."

There was no delusion in this. Helen knew herself, and Claude knew her likewise. If she would consent to be his, they might pass through life together, mutually strengthening each other, and loving all the more deeply and truly, because both could see and acknowledge that love in this world is not perfection, but probation.

Claude said this to himself, and thought himself calm and prepared for any disappointment; but, as the sound of carriage-wheels was heard in the avenue, he sank back in his chair with a sensation of faint heart sickness, and, covering his face with his hands, prayed with the earnestness of a soul overwhelmed with the anguish of an intolerable suspense, that God would bear him up, for he had no power in himself.

The footman looked into the library on his way to the hall. "They are come, sir; I don't know whether you heard the bell;" and Claude obeyed the summons and followed.

Sir Henry jumped out of the carriage and grasped his hand eagerly. "Claude, my dear fellow, indeed this is kind—home-like!" Sir Henry's eyes glistened, and his voice was husky; he glanced for an instant at Lady Augusta, and hurried on a few steps without noticing the servants, and then returned again; and, gently pushing Claude aside, said, "I'll manage, I'll manage; she will be more at home with me: she's sadly changed."

He lifted his wife to the ground, and motioned to the servants to move aside. Claude did not offer to assist; Lady Augusta's faltering step and vacant glance told their own tale; he could not venture to intrude upon her. Helen and Susan were standing by the door of the carriage, looking for parcels. Claude did not know whether they had seen him; he asked if he could help them. Helen kept her face averted, apparently not hearing. Susan turned towards him.

Change! what change could be like that? The hollow indentation of the cheek, and the marked sallow lines around the pale lips, and the swollen eyelids, weary with the effort to shut out all sight of earth, and underneath them the haziness of the dark full eyes, over which the long lashes drooped, as though the brain were so worn with thought, that one longing only was left to it, even the craving for a sleep that should know no waking. It was Susan Graham's wraith, not herself, until she spoke. Then there was the gentle voice, full of sweet womanly tenderness, with its under tone of depth and power; and across the haggard face passed a smile, not brilliant, indeed, like Helen's sunshiny, summer beauty, but bright with the touching gladness of the light which breaks through a wintry cloud, and bids us hope, even against hope, because, so God has willed, that our true joy on earth should be realised "by faith, and not by sight."

Claude started when he saw Susan. His first impulse was to ask if she had been ill; but she stopped him before the question was uttered, and giving him her hand, said, "You will be a comfort to them all." The next moment she withdrew herself from the warm grasp by which he strove to detain her, and walked on, following Lady Augusta, and none would have marked a trace of effort or self-control, except in the rigid compression of her colourless lips.

"You will allow me to take these things for you," said Claude to Helen.

She could not avoid hearing him then, and she turned round and gave him a basket and some books, and laughed nervously, as she said it was impossible to welcome him, for her hands were full.

"I don't need a welcome," he said; "if I am only allowed to be here."

Helen quickened her steps, and led the way to the library.

It was empty.

She glanced around the room, and went up to the oriel window, and sitting down in the window seat, pressed her face against the pane of glass, as though to shut in the tears which would fain have escaped.

"It is a sad return," said Claude, tenderly, as he stood behind her. "But, Helen, there must still be hope."

"None," said Helen, and she looked at him firmly, and added, "this last attack has wrecked her completely. Poor Papa!"

"And you won't think of yourself?"

"I have thought of myself too much," she said, whilst a faint smile glanced across her face. "Even now I ought to be with her."

"Stay, one moment stay;" he laid his hand upon her arm, as she rose. "Helen, will you allow no one to comfort you?"

"God will, and can," said Helen. "I wish to look only to Him."

"But He sends us earthly friends. He allows some the privilege of offering comfort."

"Yes, some who have the right," said Helen, quickly; and again she would have moved.

"And I have it not; but I had it once."

Helen shuddered and her limbs trembled. She leaned against the window seat.

"I may have it again," continued Claude, passionately, "if—oh, Helen, grant it, and I ask no other earthly happiness."

"You have tried it, and it has failed," said Helen, and her voice faltered.

"Failed, because we did not know each other; because I was exacting."

"And because I was—what I am and always shall be," said Helen, bitterly. "Claude, Claude, you forget that I have wronged you."

"Love cancels every debt," said Claude; and he took her unresisting hand in his. And Helen burst into tears, and murmured, "It is all I have to offer."

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

It was nearly dark when a fly drove up to the entrance of Wingfield Court; almost before it had reached the door, eager eyes were looking out, and loving voices uttering their words of welcome.

"My precious child!" and Susan, as she threw herself into her mother's arms, felt that warm kiss of unspeakable, holy, unselfish affection, for which, when it is taken from us, we pine in the hour of our lonely sorrow, as the pilgrim pines for the water in the desert.

"Isabella, dearest, you look so well." Susan's accent was so full of sympathising pleasure and congratulations, that her sisters, in their delight at her return, could trace in it no under tone of heaviness. Anna drew her into the study. "See, we have had a fire lighted for you, you are such a chilly mortal. Now, let us look at you;" and Susan was unwillingly turned towards the light.

"She doesn't look well," said Isabella, gravely.

And Mrs. Graham took Susan's trembling hand in both hers, and in a voice which she vainly tried to render calm, said: "My darling, you should have told us you had been ill."

"No, indeed, indeed;" — Susan laughed — oh! such a hard laugh! — "we have been travelling rather fast the last week, and Lady Augusta has been very ill, and made every one anxious. I want rest, I shall do quite well then; indeed, I only want rest. Now, Isabella, tell me every thing about home."

Home meant "every thing about yourself;" but Isabella could not make her confession before so many, and she only put her arm round her sister, and said: "I am very happy," — and the large tears glistened in her eyes. But there were no tears in Susan's; only a quiet, fixed look which seemed to show that she had a difficulty in understanding even her own words. Mrs. Graham would not appear to watch her. She asked questions about Helen and Lady Augusta, and the journey, and conversed about home matters, and by degrees drew Isabella out, and helped her over her first shyness, and made Anna talk about little things which happened in the neighbourhood; and when the sisters seemed to have satisfied their first eager curiosity and excitement, she said: "This poor child wants quiet, so she shall go and lie down in her own room a little, and then we will have tea, and after tea Martha shall unpack for her."

"Not yet, mamma. Susan, you haven't heard half; you mustn't go yet," said Anna, trying to detain her.

And Isabella kissed her and added, that it was hard to lose sight of her even for half an hour.

But Susan did not say she wished to stay; she moved mechanically till she reached the door, and then she turned round and smiled, and said: "We must talk all the evening, I am tired now;" and followed her mother upstairs.

"Anna wanted to have your little room new-papered whilst you were away, my child," said Mrs. Graham, as she opened the door of Susan's apartment; "but I thought you should have your own choice; and I fancied too, that you would like to see it just the same."

"Thank you, yes; no change;—I don't want any change." Susan sat down at the foot of the bed.

"Only rest, my darling. Will you try and get some now?"

"I don't know. Oh! mamma, mamma, is it really home?" Susan's eye wandered round the room, and she grasped her mother's hand tightly.

"Really home, my own child; with so many, many hearts to love you! You will feel the quietness of it soon; you have had too much anxiety and excitement."

"Quiet! Oh yes, it will be very quiet," said Susan; "and I want that. Mamma, you won't let me go from you again." The tone of sorrowful entreaty went to her mother's heart.

"My child, how can you ask me? I have longed for you every hour of your absence, — but I felt, — I hoped you were happy." Mrs. Graham fixed her eyes earnestly on Susan's face, and unable to bear the glance, Susan turned away, and said quickly: "I was happy, I enjoyed it all very much at first."

"But at last, when Lady Augusta became so ill, there could have been nothing but anxiety; only you must have been such a comfort to Helen."

"I hope I was, — I don't know." Susan trembled violently.

"Are you uneasy about her? Is there any thing amiss?" asked Mrs. Graham, anxiously.

"Oh! no, no; she is very good; and she will be quite happy. Mamma," and Susan turned round suddenly, and her voice became strangely firm, yet hollow, "she will marry Mr. Egerton."

The quickness of a mother's insight! It is a second prophecy, for in those few words the vague dread of years was realised. Mrs. Graham drew Susan towards her and whispered: "God help you, my darling!" — and Susan throwing herself on her

knees, hid her face in her mother's lap, and murmured, shuddering: "Hate me, mamma; I deserve it; I am wicked; I am not worthy to be with you."

"God sees no sin, my precious one, in the feelings which He gives us, unless they are wrongly indulged."

"They are wrong, they must be;" Susan lifted up her haggard face, and her look was wild in its agony; "he did not think of me; he never, never cared for me. But I thought,—oh! indeed, I thought,—I would not have dwelt upon it,—I would have left every thing. Mamma, you think,—you know I would. Oh! it is so terrible, so terrible."

"My child, God will help you in this, none else can. He sees it was not meant."

"He knows I would have Helen happy, and I tried;—mamma, I tried. It was left to me, and I said all I could, and I bore up. Helen thought as I did, she told me so. It was one night,—the night Lady Augusta was taken ill,—she told me that he had been more to me than to her, and she could not think he cared for her. And I said it plainly,—I would not let my voice change; I told her that I was nothing to him; and then—Oh! mother, mother, let me die;" and Susan's voice grew faint, and her hands dropped powerless by her side.

Mrs. Graham drew her towards the bed and laid her gently upon it; her lips parted into a feeble smile, but there were no tears of relief, no softening of the stony gaze of anguish; and still she kept her mother's hand in hers, and murmured, "Sinful, sinful! save me, mother, save me!"

• "The feelings which God would not have called sinful if it had been His will to bless them, cannot be sinful in His sight because He sees good to disappoint them, my darling. He has sent you a trial, not a punishment."

"But I indulged them. I ought to have seen. I was blind, because I wished it," continued Susan: "and now—oh! mamma, mamma! if they were not sinful then, they are now; and I have them, I can't escape from them." She covered her face with her hands.

"My child! the future must be left to God. I have no misgivings. It would be a wicked want of faith to doubt that He will enable you to overcome every thing. You have done so, already. He sees, and I see, that you have acted nobly."

"No, never, never," exclaimed Susan. "Mamma, I said the truth to Helen; I don't know how; I scarcely knew what I said; but the horrible feeling, the jealousy was there still. I thought

I was not jealous ; and — I don't know," — she paused for a moment, and gazing piteously in her mother's face, murmured, — "if he had said once, only once, that he loved me, I think I could have given him to Helen and been happy."

And then came a torrent of impetuous, overwhelming tears, and the heavy-laden heart seemed for a while to have found relief.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

THERE followed a weary time, — days of anxious care and nights of watching. The deep stream which bends its quiet course through the smooth meadows, gathers force from the fulness of its unwasted powers, and when at length it is roused into energy, has an overwhelming strength unknown to the fretting, tossing waters which have chased their way over rocks and stones, and turned aside at every obstacle to wear for themselves new channels, expending their eagerness in foam and bubble.

Susan Graham had been called cold, sometimes she had even called herself so. The things which excited others had but little power over her ; the harassing annoyances which rendered others miserable were regarded by her as matters of indifference. Even the enjoyments of life were received by her calmly ; she was never roused to ecstasy and had but few impulses of enthusiasm. Her deepest feelings were known, even to herself, chiefly by the effort made to control them ; for her smiles were given to her fellow-creatures, whilst her tears were reserved for God ; and that which we pour forth before Him we are little able to realise to ourselves.

So it was that not even Mrs. Graham, with all her loving perception of her daughter's character, was fully prepared for the effect which one great shock might produce. She had known that Susan might, and probably would, love intensely, if ever the feeling were awakened at all, but she had calculated upon the habitual self-restraint, the daily and hourly watchfulness which had been her child's characteristic almost from infancy, to guard her against the possibility either of a misplaced or an exaggerated affection. The circumstances which had actually occurred had been, if not entirely unforeseen, at least quite beyond her control. It was a thought to which she was compelled continually to recur, in order to keep her mind in its right balance, as she sat by Susan's bedside, watching the wasting of continual fever, listening to the

half-penitent, half-agonised confessions of the sorrowful and broken heart, and marking the struggles for resignation, and the conflict with haunting memories and natural feelings, which the sensitive conscience condemned.

In the utter prostration of her physical powers, Susan had become like a little child. She had not strength to be reserved, and little by little, by broken sentences and passing observations, and often by the doubtful questionings of a heart busy with self-upbraiding, and touched in that tenderest point of womanly feeling which, if it is once wounded, can never be entirely healed, she revealed the story of her life.

Who was to blame? Mrs. Graham's first thought turned upon herself. Long, long before, the dread of such a catastrophe had crossed her mind: but could she by any step of her own have averted it? She might have refused to join the Admiral in London, and so have kept Claude and Susan apart: but her duty at that time was to minister to the old man's comfort; and Claude was absorbed in politics; and Susan's feelings had been nipped in the bud by his avowed preference for Helen. She had no right to conjure up a very unlikely and remote evil, and allow it to interfere with a present duty. The journey abroad had been planned and carried out without reference to Claude, and solely out of kindness to Helen. The very fact that Susan was with her cousin would, at first sight, have rendered it wholly improbable that she should have been thrown in the way of Claude. No human power had planned that meeting. If blame could be attached to any person, it must be to Claude; and Mrs. Graham would have blamed him bitterly, almost unpardonably, but for a note received from Helen, the day after her return; announcing her own happiness, and anxiously inquiring for Susan, and begging to be allowed to see her. She spoke in it of Isabella's approaching marriage, and said that she had taken a great liberty in mentioning it to Claude; but that she had found he was under a false impression as regarded Susan, thinking that the engagement was hers; and as the thing seemed now generally known, she had thought it better to set him right. The mistake was mentioned in the simplest, most matter-of-fact way; for it was a matter of indifference to Helen, except that she would have cared much more for Susan's prospects of happiness than she did for Isabella's: but to Mrs. Graham it afforded an interpretation of Claude's conduct, which removed the weight as of a mountain from her heart. Whether his manner and his words had been always wise and prudent, she could not judge; for she had not been a witness to

them. But she could well understand the ease and freedom which the idea that Susan's affections were engaged had given him. At least, he had not intentionally, or even carelessly, trifled with her feelings; he was still what she had always thought him; and with this clue Mrs. Graham threw aside every painful mis-giving, and bore patiently the details which Susan in her candour and simplicity unintentionally revealed, and which had been the means of fatally wrecking her happiness.

They were sitting together one evening about three weeks after Susan's return. The fever was subdued; and, for the first time, she had been carried from her bed and laid upon a sofa by the window. It was warm for the beginning of September, and the flowers on the table, which were daily sent from Ivors, gave a cheerful summer look to the little room; although the view from it was not of trees and fields, but of the lane which divided the garden of Wingfield Court from the town.

"I did not mean to return and be a burden," said Susan, as she laid her wasted hand upon her mother's. "I thought I should come back and help to prepare every thing for Isabella's wedding; but I am only a drawback."

"Isabella will not have to wait longer than she first expected," said Mrs. Graham. "We always talked of three months. You will be strong I trust by that time, my darling." She looked at Susan uneasily.

"I mean to be well, mamma; that is, if it please God. I wish to be." There was a pause, and Susan added: "I try to wish it."

Mrs. Graham kissed her tenderly. "You must wish it for my sake, my child. What should I do without you?"

"Yes; I think of that. I could not live, at least, I think not, without that feeling."

"Or without the feeling of being a comfort to some one," said Mrs. Graham.

"Some one," repeated Susan, and she faintly smiled; "that was the first lesson I remember when I was quite a tiny child; that I was to be a comfort to some one. I did not think then that it could ever be difficult. I fancied I was a comfort to every one."

"And you have been, my darling. No one has done more in a short life to make others happy than you have."

"It seems nothing now," said Susan; "and mamma, ——" and the struggling anguish dimmed her eyes; — "the power seems all gone."

"But it will come again. We want peace and rest ourselves, and then we can give it to others."

"Rest, rest," murmured Susan. She turned her head away, and a convulsive shudder passed over her; as she added, in a voice scarcely audible: "If I could forget! if it were not sinful!"

"My child, we have talked of that before: we won't return to it now; it is not a thought for reason, you must banish it."

"But it comes, it haunts me," said Susan; and she fixed her hollow eyes upon her mother imploringly. "When I go to sleep, it is there; and when I wake up in the night it comes to me as the first thought, and every thing brings it back to me. Mamma, — you know it," — she caught Mrs. Graham's hand, "he would think it sinful; he would despise me. Sometimes, oh! I have such a wild, wild fancy; that I must go to him and tell him all, and hear him say that he loathes me; and then that I would hide myself somewhere far off, and no one should hear my name again."

"You are ill, my darling, that is one cause of all this; you have no power to reason justly. Sinful feelings are those which we wilfully indulge, knowing, or even suspecting, that they are contrary to the law of God. Where there was no law, there could have been no sin. But no power of argument will teach you this now; only when the wild fancy comes, remember that you may say it all to God, and that will help you more than any acknowledgment to man."

"I pray, indeed I pray," said Susan, "when I can; but my thoughts wander back, and I seem too wicked to be heard."

"But even if you can't pray, if your thoughts seem quite incoherent, yet say them to God. We may speak to Him when we have scarcely the power to pray, because we have not strength to wish."

"And He will forgive," said Susan, doubtfully. "But the feelings won't go. Mamma! mamma! what shall I do if they don't?"

"They will go, my child. God sends a blessing with time, which we can never understand as we look forward."

"But if I don't want them to go?" said Susan, and her look for a moment was eager and imploring; and then the whole expression of her face changed, and she tried to hide her face with her thin hands, as she said in a hollow voice: "Mamma, I cannot part with the memory; it is my all."

"My darling one, that will be your trial; the bitter, bitter trial. But oh! Susan, is there any thing with which one would not part for God?"

Susan was silent. Her mother saw the trembling of her whole frame, and the large drops which, as she turned aside her head, forced their way down her wasted cheeks. For a few moments the long fingers were clasped together convulsively; and then Susan looked round again, and a faint smile lit up her face, and she said: "Mamma, I have asked Him to take it from me."

"My own child, I knew you would have strength for the prayer. Yet I can tell, oh! so much better than you may think, the struggle it must cost to think that it will be granted."

"I have thought," said Susan, "that I might live with memory. Even lately, as I have been lying here at times alone, I have let my mind go back, and then there was rest; no, not rest, but something better than rest,—something,—mamma——" she threw her arms round her mother's neck, and whispered, "if I might only love him still in my dreams!"

Mrs. Graham rested the weary head on her shoulder, and whispered: "Our Lord gave up all for us, Susan. There was nothing withheld, not even his Father's love."

"Yes, all, all; mamma, I will try." And there was a long silence; then Susan laid her head back again on her pillow, and said quietly: "Will life be very long?"

"As long as God wills; and He has work for us to do."

"I have no power now for work," said Susan.

"Only the power to struggle," replied Mrs. Graham. "But there is no work so great as that."

"For oneself, yes. But I was so vain, so proud. I thought I did not need any care for myself; and now there is no one else whom I can do any thing for."

"My darling, you cannot see how God is dealing with you; the work for which He is preparing you. May I tell you; can you bear to hear what I think that may be; if it should please Him that you should never marry?"

"To live for you? to love you, and comfort you, and be more to you than ten thousand Ruths could have been to Naomi; never never, to leave you, my own sweet mother," exclaimed Susan, passionately; and holding Mrs. Graham's hand in hers, she added: "I can bear any thing from you."

"Yes, to be with me always, I trust, my child," replied Mrs. Graham; "to be my blessing and comfort unspeakable. But not to live for me only. This is a dreary world, Susan, and there are many lonely and aching hearts to be found in it; and but few to comfort them, because so many have found their own homes of happiness, and live in their own circles, and finding all their duties

and their sympathies within, have no leisure to attend to the claims without. We must not for a moment condemn them. God has appointed them their place, and there is very much that is good and holy in these deep concentrated affections. But there are some whom He has seen fit to set free from such exclusive ties. He has given them hearts as large—feelings as deep—but there is no one earthly channel into which they may exclusively flow. Yet He must have a purpose for those feelings; and it seems as though He wills them, not to sink and deepen, but to expand.”

“But they do not,” said Susan. “We are all selfish.”

“Not all,” said Mrs. Graham. “I know that many will not acknowledge what I say, and when they find themselves shut out from what they have accustomed themselves to consider the great happiness of life, they allow their affections to become chilled, and exhaust all their energies upon self and self-gratification. But I can never believe that this is a necessary consequence of their lot. Rather, I feel that they must have been intended to fill up all the blanks and hollows which are left between the circles of married life; to spread themselves out in sympathy with griefs and cares which can find no echo and no comfort elsewhere. That, my darling, I can imagine to be your work on earth. God has given you a very loving, tender nature, and a truth of character which naturally inspires confidence; and so I can fancy you going through life like one of those clear streams which we sometimes see winding through a barren country, its course tracked by the bright greenness of its banks. You were born to be a blessing, Susan. And if God wills that you should learn your work more surely by the experience of suffering, you will not murmur.”

“Mamma, no indeed; but the suffering is selfish: it can do no good to any but myself, and I have borne it so miserably.”

“All suffering is selfish, except as we make use of it for others,” said Mrs. Graham. “But even our past sins may be turned into blessings, if we will, by teaching us how to guard others against them. Dear child! you know very little of the world, but if God should spare your life, I cannot but feel certain that you will, by and by, recognise fully all that He is doing for you now; teaching you lessons of tenderness, opening your heart to understand feelings which might otherwise have been judged hardly. If even our Blessed Lord Himself vouchsafed to learn sympathy by the experience of sorrow, surely we may be thankful to do the same.”

“And the loneliness,” said Susan, in a low voice; and tears

stood in her eyes, and were kept down by a strong effort, as she added, "Mamma, that is so wicked, when I have you."

"*My* love will not satisfy you, my darling. I would rather you should face the truth at once, unshrinkingly. A void has been created in our hearts which only one kind of earthly love can entirely fill. God has willed to deny you that,"—and Mrs. Graham passed her hand fondly over Susan's forehead, and stooped to kiss her colourless cheek,—“but He has not willed that you should go through life in loneliness. There is another love, before which all human affection fades into nothingness.”

“God's love,” said Susan; “I thought once that I understood it; but I don't now.”

“You do, though you cannot realise it.”

Susan shook her head mournfully, as she answered, “I gave myself to an earthly affection, and God took His love from me.”

“No, my darling, never. God allowed you to feel what an earthly affection might be, and withdrew it that you might give your heart in its full strength to Him. Only be patient with yourself, and the blessing will come. As you learn to strengthen and quicken your feelings by living in the happiness of your fellow creatures, the weight which keeps your heart from rising to God will be removed, and then you will know how fully that deep spirit of devotion can satisfy every need.”

“It ought; it would with others,” said Susan.

“It ought with all; but it does not,” replied Mrs. Graham, “because persons make it second, where it ought to be first. God's love is a jealous love. He will give us only what we seek. If we are contented with our earthly ties, and merely think of Him gratefully as the author of our enjoyment, we may be what is called religious—that is, we may be very careful in all our duties, we may be excellent wives, and mothers, and children, but we shall never know what the real blessedness of religion is. That is the danger of married life, Susan, where it is perfectly happy; it may be—of course I do not say it will be—so satisfying, that the feeling given to God is, in comparison, cold. If it is not so satisfying, we may be well contented to do without it, and take in its stead that which God offers,—a love which can never change, never misunderstand, which waits for us when our hearts are chilled, and deepens as they are faint and sad; which is more fond than the love of a husband, more watchful than the care of a parent, and sympathised with us before we understood the affection of sisters or of brothers; a real, earnest, living, intense love, and to which we may give, not mere duty, or rever-

ence, or gratitude, but the warm, eager, absorbing affection which is infinite as the craving of our hearts, and lasting as the blessedness of eternity."

Mrs. Graham paused. Susan laid her hand gently on her mother's, and said, "I am better now, mamma. Will you read me some prayers?"

And the prayers were said; and when they were ended Susan remained quiet for a little time, and then sent for Isabella, and talked to her of her new home, and even read some letters from Mr. Berry; and when she left her, heard her say, "There is no one so dear as Susan; she throws herself into every person's business exactly as if it were her own."

That was the first effort and the first reward.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

HOURS pass very slowly in illness, yet they passed too quickly for Mrs. Graham's comfort. Her outward attention was often given to Isabella, but her secret thoughts were centred in Susan. Day by day, as she marked the progress made in the recovery of her child's bodily health, the wreck of her happiness became more visible. Every thing was an effort; all duties had lost their interest. Whilst Susan was able to keep to her own room the burden had been comparatively light, for she was able to give herself rest in her own way; but for the first few days that she came downstairs again and mixed with the family, the perpetual exertion seemed at times more than she could bear. Yet she kept up wonderfully upon the whole; and entered at once into all that was going on, and made little plans of duty or of pleasure for others, and even for herself; especially showing herself watchful for Isabella's happiness, and giving her those little marks of tender sympathy which touch the heart and induce it to open itself freely; and Mrs. Graham could not but see that the hours of weakness which Susan spent on her sofa were likely to work more for Isabella's good than many years of previous training.

But Susan never spoke of herself now. In the first agony of a great grief we can all be unreserved; but when sorrow has settled itself into its place, and made for itself the home in our memories in which it must dwell till death, we can no longer bear that the eye of a fellow creature should gaze upon it.

Susan was quite changed ; yet it was not a change which even her sisters could comment upon. She had a kind word, a smile, an affectionate thought for them continually. If the interest was not awakened spontaneously, it was at least so genuine in its nature that none had cause to complain. Only one thing was remarked by Anna,—that although Helen's re-engagement was fully known, Susan had never yet expressed any curiosity as to the time fixed for the wedding, and had hitherto shunned the idea of seeing her cousin ; saying always that she would wait till she felt stronger ; that Helen knew her so well, she could not possibly think it unkind.

But the effort must be made shortly ; and Mrs. Graham knew that the longer it was delayed the more trying it would be. Besides, events were hastening on. Lady Augusta was in a state from which she was not likely to rally, but in which she might linger long. Helen had at first utterly rejected the idea of leaving her ; but even Sir Henry was urgent that there should be no delay. Helen could be little or no comfort to Lady Augusta, who was now only occasionally conscious of her presence, and had never been made to understand the fact of her engagement ; and for himself, heavy-hearted though he was, yet there was something of brightness and hope in the thought of Helen's marriage with Claude to which he clung as to the one remaining prospect of earthly interest. He might be alone at Ivors, but there would be Helmsley to look to for change and society, and perhaps, by and by—his sanguine spirit wandered into the future with a strange tenacity of happiness—he might give up Ivors to Maurice, who was very likely to marry, and then he could be with Claude and Helen in his old age.

And so Sir Henry put aside his present griefs as well as he could ; and talked to Helen of her wedding, as he might have done in the brighter days, when it had seemed to realise all that he or Lady Augusta could desire for herself or for them. He called to see Mrs. Graham on the very day that every thing was settled. It was quite necessary to him to talk to some one ; and Helen and Claude were gone out together, and Maurice, who was expected, had not yet arrived ; and so he made it a matter of duty to go himself to Wingfield, and tell his sister-in-law all that had been arranged, and ask for her advice. He had a scheme, too, in his head which he thought admirable. Helen must have some lady with her, and no one could be so proper as her aunt ; and it was his plan that Mrs. Graham should remove to Ivors several days before the wedding, that she might superintend every thing

and be a comfort to Helen. And then it would be so pleasant, he thought, for the cousins to be together. Helen and Susan were quite like sisters, and it would be really hard for them to be parted at the last; and the change might do poor Susan good. He had not seen her since her illness; and he fancied she was suffering from over-exertion and anxiety about Lady Augusta, and so considered himself doubly bound to think about her and be careful for her.

In the fulness of his heart, Sir Henry proposed his scheme to Isabella and Anna, whom he found sitting alone in the drawing-room, the study having been given up to Susan.

"Where is your mamma, my dear? I have a great deal to talk to her about; can't she come to me? we are going to have a wedding soon, you know, at Ivors!" and for a moment poor Sir Henry's face brightened, and then grew sad again as he added, "It is not what it might have been; but we don't allow ourselves to complain. God knows best how these things should be. I want to have you all over there."

"Is it to be very soon!" said Isabella. "I am afraid Susan will not be strong enough."

"Oh! but we shall make her strong. The change will be every thing to her; we had a very trying time the last week of our journey! I have never quite made up my mind, whether Markham was right in sending us abroad; but any how it is too late to think of that now. I should like to see Susan very much. Is she in the study, did you say?"

He rose and went to the door.

"Please wait. I am not sure," said Isabella, rather nervously, as she followed him; but his hand had touched the lock.

"Frances, Susan; any admittance for an elderly gentleman?"

Before Mrs. Graham could answer, Susan's voice was heard, saying, "Uncle Henry! yes, please come;" and the tone was so bright and affectionate, that Sir Henry stepped forward eagerly, quite forgetting her illness.

He was reminded of it, though painfully. At the first glance he started back. "What, Susan! You never told me, Frances, what was the matter. You have been listening to those Wingfield doctors, who are only fit to dose horses." He sat down by Susan, and took up her hand and examined it. "Bad work this, my poor child; but it must not go on; you must have a change. Frances, you must bring her to Ivors: and we'll have Markham down to see her. He's coming next week to Lady Augusta."

"Thank you, very much; but I fancy time and mamma will be

the best doctors," said Mrs. Graham, trying to smile. "Considerable progress has been made the last week."

"It must be a snail's progress backwards, then," said Sir Henry. "Why, the poor child could not look much worse if she was dying. No, no, Frances; you must take her away from this place. Town air is always unwholesome, and I can't get the commissioners to look to Wingfield as they might, and you have a very unhealthy population near you in the back streets."

"I dare say change may be good, by and by," said Mrs. Graham, unwilling to chill him by refusing his kindness.

"By and by won't suit me so well as just now," said Sir Henry. "You know I was always rather given to selfishness, Frances; and I confess that when I cast a stone, I like to kill a bird for myself, as well as my neighbour. Claude and Helen, you know, have made it up together, and are talking of being married in another three weeks."

"So soon!" Mrs. Graham glanced at Susan, but she lay quite still with her gaze riveted on one spot on the wall.

"It seems soon, but the fact is,—of course I can say it all out to you, being quite sure that you will understand,—Poor Lady Augusta's state is very precarious. Markham says things may go on as they are for another year; they may all come to an end in a few months, or even less. Now Helen was very uneasy, and talked of waiting, and in fact would have insisted upon it, if I would have allowed it: but I felt that, under the circumstances, delays were worse than dangerous; and Claude has had such a weary time, and behaved really so nobly, that it seemed cruel to keep him longer hanging between heaven and earth. So I overruled all her scruples, and put forward my own plan, that the marriage should be as soon as possible, and quite quiet, just yourselves, and the Humes, and Julia Manners. No one else, except, perhaps, some of Claude's cousins. Then, when they are married, if matters should take an uncomfortable turn at Ivors, Helen can be there at any moment. It won't really make any difference, except as to Claude's happiness. Poor fellow! he is desperately in love, worse now than ever; and to do Helen justice, I believe she is nearly as bad. Susan, my dear, do I talk too fast for you?"

Susan had moved her head away from the light.

"She has not yet become accustomed to visitors," said Mrs. Graham; but Susan turned round quickly, and touched her uncle's arm, as he was going to rise, and said, "I should like to hear all."

"All is not much," continued Sir Henry, reseating himself with evident willingness; "but since you like to hear, I will just tell you in a few words what has been settled."

"They must be very few, then," observed Mrs. Graham.

"Indeed, I can bear it quite well," said Susan, whilst her voice assumed a peculiar tone of firmness.

"I won't tire you, my dear, I will take care. They talk of being married on the sixteenth, Wednesday three weeks; then they go for a short tour in Scotland. It is rather late in the year for the north, but Claude wants to visit some relations. Afterward they are to settle themselves at Helmsley; and as Claude may be obliged to be in London at the end of the year, Helen talks of coming to us for a little while. However, I don't look forward; God knows what may happen before then. All I think of is the present moment."

"And that seems tolerably bright, I hope," said Mrs. Graham, moving her chair, as a hint that he should go.

"Yes; very fairly so. As much so as we have a right to expect. But I must have you at Ivors, Frances; I can't get on without you."

"I would be there for the day, certainly; but you see I have claims at home. Isabella means to follow Helen's example; and there is my poor child here."

"Ah! Isabella, — how selfish one is! I quite forgot to ask about her."

"It is a very quiet matter-of-fact affair with her," said Mrs. Graham. "There have been very few difficulties. She and Mr. Berry have known each other a long time; and I believe he has never really cared for any one else, neither has she, and so they have made a very comfortable engagement; and I look forward thankfully to seeing her married and settled as a clergyman's wife at East Dudden. They won't be rich, but they will have a competency, and I am quite satisfied with him as Isabella's husband, though he would not have suited every one."

"Not you, Susan, I suppose that means," said Sir Henry. "I always thought mamma looked upon you as the flower of her flock. But she was taught to do that. The poor old Admiral! what a pet he made of her, Frances!"

Susan's lips were closely compressed together for a few seconds, and then the aching heart could bear the anguish no longer, and she cried bitterly.

Sir Henry was very much distressed. He did not know what he had done, or how. He could only kiss her, and tell her she was ill and wanted change, and that she must come to Ivors. Claude and Helen would both be charmed to see her. There was no one scarcely whom Claude esteemed as he did her. He had

said, only the other day, that he felt more than half his happiness to be owing to her; she had done so much for Helen. "And Helen is perfection now, I must say that," added Sir Henry, with a father's pride. "All her beauty coming back; and such thought for every one. Poor Lady Augusta! That's the business! If she could but understand it all." He sighed heavily; and the sigh seemed to chase away the tears from Susan's face; and she said gently: "You must let us come and see you very often when Helen is gone."

"My poor child! yes, of course; but before that —. Why, Helen has reckoned upon you as one of the bridesmaids."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Mrs. Graham, quickly, and what for her was almost angrily.

But Susan put her hand affectionately within that of her uncle, and said: "If I am not quite well enough, Isabella or Anna can take my place. Helen won't think it unkind; indeed, she must not. I do love her so much."

The expression of her face was so pleading, weary, and haggard; it struck some deep chord of feeling in Sir Henry's heart, and he dashed his hand across his eyes, and stood up hastily and murmured: "To be sure; we won't worry you; we'll talk of it all another day. You must get strong, my dear child;" and then he stooped down and kissed her, and wrung Mrs. Graham's hand in silence, and hurried away.

As the door closed behind him, Susan looked at her mother's anxious face, and said: "I can bear all, mamma; God will give me strength."

And from that moment there was no further discussion about the visit to Ivors, until it was definitely fixed that they should go there for two days preceding the marriage, and that Isabella and Anna should be Helen's bridesmaids.

CHAPTER LXXXVI

BRIGHTLY and hopefully rose the sun on the morning of Helen Clare's wedding day; making its way through gathering clouds into the clearness of the pure blue sky. It woke many hearts to gladness, some to thought and prayer, and one to the struggle of a broken heart.

Mrs. Graham stood by Susan's bedside as the first brilliant rays streamed through the half closed shutters.

"My child, I hoped you were asleep; there is no occasion for you to be disturbed."

"I have been awake a long time," said Susan. "Mamma, is it a fine day?"

She sat up in bed, and her mother drew the curtain from before the window.

"Lovely; so it promises."

"I am so glad; it ought to be lovely. I think I must get up."

"Why, dearest? You will only tire yourself, and you can do nothing."

"No, nothing." Susan's head sank back on her pillow for an instant, but she raised it again. "Dear mamma, you promised me I might have my own way to-day; I don't want to be wilful, but please let me get up."

"Not to go to Helen, my darling."

"Please, please." Susan's voice became very earnest. "I can help her, and I ought if I can. Mamma, let me do my duty to-day."

"Over-fatigue is no duty," said Mrs. Graham.

"Mother, dearest, don't make me lie here." And the tone of piteous entreaty overcame Mrs. Graham's determination, and she kissed Susan many times, and then left her to dress.

When next they met it was in Helen's room, in the midst of confusion and bustle; Annette superintending Helen's toilette, chattering and ordering; servants knocking at the door continually asking for directions; Helen herself, pale, nervous, trying to give her attention to what was passing, but with thoughts bewildered with present happiness, and past sorrow; and self-distrust; and Susan, standing in the midst of all, suggesting in her quiet, gentle tones, holding pins for Annette, whispering fond words to Helen, yet with that inwrought expression of suffering which is occasionally to be read in the human countenance, even when the anguish itself had passed, and which shows that grief has been petrified by some sudden shock, and has left a trace which time can never eradicate.

"Now, Annette, that will do," said Helen, as the wreath of orange flowers was fastened, and the veil thrown over her head. She glanced at herself in the pier-glass; the beauty which it reflected could not be hidden even from herself. It seemed as if for an instant she realised it. The tall, slight figure, with its graceful outline set off by the rich folds of the white silk dress, and the exceeding sweetness of the fair face, so delicate in its

features, so clear and brilliant in its complexion, and shaded by the braids of dark hair and the light veil which fell around it. It was a picture which none could look upon unmoved, and Helen's eye rested upon the lovely image, and a look of calm self-contentment passed over her countenance; and then, as some sudden thought struck her, she turned abruptly away, and tears filled her eyes, and she said, very quietly, "Annette, I think it is all done now. I wish to be alone. Dear Aunt Fanny, you won't care?"

"My child, no; of course that is what you want."

"And I must go presently. I must see mamma," said Helen, and her voice seemed choked.

Mrs. Graham looked round. "That will do, Annette, thank you; I will do any thing else for Miss Clare."

Annette unwillingly left the room.

"One word only, I would say, dearest Helen. I don't think it is necessary to go to Lady Augusta now; afterwards, before you go away, will be sufficient; it will only upset you."

"I must," said Helen; "I must ask her forgiveness. She won't understand, she can't give it me, but I must ask it. Oh! Aunt Fanny!"—and her eye turned again to the glass, and then wandered eagerly round the luxurious apartment—"why did God bestow so much upon me only that I might waste it?"

Susan it was who answered, with her thin hands clasped together, and her figure slightly bent forward, whilst her voice came from the very depths of her full heart. "Helen, God has given it all back to you again, that you might make Claude happy."

And the bright smile of irrepressible joy lit up Helen's face in an instant, and as she threw her arms round her cousin's neck, she whispered, "Susan, if I can ever do that, I shall owe it all to you."

Susan went to her own little sitting-room. Helen had prepared it for her on the day she came to Ivors. It was over the library, and looked out upon the flower-garden. She sat down by the window, unable to occupy herself; she could hear a great deal that went on in the house; Annette's voice, especially, told what progress the business of dressing the bridesmaids was making, and which of the few guests who were to be present had arrived; and once she came in with Isabella and Anna in their wedding attire, purposely to exhibit them, to pronounce the pink dress and white bonnets "Charmant, parfait!" and to look at Susan with an eye of compassion, and perhaps a little contempt, as she leaned back in the arm-chair in her dark silk dress, the

Cinderella of the day. Annette had never loved Susan. There had always been a certain suspicion in her mind of rivalry with Helen, and now, when the thought was set at rest, she had something of malicious pleasure in dwelling upon it.

But Susan was far beyond Annette's power of teasing; she was out of the reach of every feeling, indeed, except a sense of strong support, arising from the calm trustfulness of spirit which lays its burden upon God. She did not think herself miserable; she did not think of herself at all; but as she sat alone, she repeated to herself verses of the Psalms, not always understanding their meaning, and sometimes being quite unable to fix her attention upon the words, but yet being soothed and strengthened with them.

It was as though she were grasping some strong Hand mechanically, and knew that if she let it go for an instant she must fall.

So an hour passed by, and Mrs. Graham, who had been with Susan for a few minutes from time to time, came in to say that every one had arrived, and they were now only waiting for the carriages to take them to church.

"Helen will come to me for one moment, mamma, won't she?" asked Susan.

"If she can, my dearest, and if it is wise. And Claude has been asking for you; he wished to see you last night when he first arrived, but I would not hear of it."

Mrs. Graham hoped that her voice was firm, but it was not.

"Dearest mamma, I am so thankful, so satisfied." Susan held her mother's hand fondly, and a smile, the first that had been seen on that day, passed over her features.

A tear was in Mrs. Graham's eye; she averted her face, and looked out of the window. Something which she saw startled her, and a half exclamation was uttered.

Susan looked out also. Claude was below, walking in the garden by himself. She said nothing, but continued gazing at him.

Mrs. Graham made some little movement to withdraw her attention, but Susan did not notice it, her eyes were intensely fixed.

At last she turned round again, and said: "Mamma I have prayed for him. God will not be angry with me for that." She took her prayer-book from the table, and turned to the marriage service.

Mrs. Graham did not trust herself to speak for some seconds. At last she said: "You shall see Helen before the service my darling, and Claude afterwards."

"Yes, dear mamma, thank you, that will be the best. I shall like to see Helen at once."

And Helen came, hurried, pale with agitation, her eyes dark with the tears which she dared not allow to escape. She had been in Lady Augusta's room.

"Pray for me, Susan," she said. "Ask that my sins may not be visited upon me."

"Dear Helen, this is not the time to think so gloomily," replied Susan, gently.

"I have been to mamma," continued Helen. "She knew me— nothing more, I could not make her understand." There was a sorrowful bitterness in her tone; but Susan looked at her with a winning expression of sympathy, and Helen's buoyant spirits rose, whilst the cloud passed from her face, and she said, glancing at the prayer-book in Susan's lap: "I must go; you will think of us. May Claude come now, or by and by?"

There was a pause. Susan's answer was very low: "By and by, not now."

Helen turned to her, struck by something in the accent; and instantaneously, as if the truth had been revealed by a lightning-flash, her woman's instinct read the truth, which till that moment her own happiness had hidden from her.

She threw open the window, and gasped for breath. Susan caught her cousin's hand, and Helen tried to speak, but her voice was choked. She covered her face for an instant, and then would have moved away. At the same moment a breath of air turned the pages of the prayer-book lying in Susan's lap, and the withered rose leaves, gathered in the garden of the Armenian convent, were wafted away.

Helen stooped to gather them up, but Susan stopped her. "Let them go, let them go," she said; the expression of her face for one moment was agony, the next it had recovered its deep calmness.

The cousins clasped each other in one long, silent embrace. The door closed behind Helen, and as Mrs. Graham would have replaced the rose leaves in the book, Susan said: "Not again, mamma. I wish to give up all."

In Ivors church Helen Clare knelt before God, and repeated her steadfast vow, to love, to honour, and obey, according to His appointment; and in her lonely chamber, Susan Graham knelt also, to pray for Helen that the vow might be kept, and for herself, that she might be enabled to offer herself a "reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice" to the service of Him, who was her all in all.

The Eye that seeth the heart was doubtless upon both, and both in His sight must have been accepted.

It is vain to argue upon the abstract question of comparative duty and self-sacrifice, where God's Providence is manifestly visible. He it is who educates us by the circumstances in which He permits us to be placed. If with a pure heart we follow the guiding of His Hand, all will and must be well; whether our path through life be cheered by the sunshine of a satisfying affection, or overshadowed by the consciousness that there is a happiness of which we have never tasted.

It is but a path, we forget that. And if God will that it should be the path of sorrow, there will be one unseen to tread it with us; and who does not feel that the loneliness which is accepted for Christ's sake, that moment ceases to be loneliness, and is but the realisation of the deepest, most perfect sympathy?

Susan knelt still; she was not praying, but listening. She leaned against a chair,—pale, motionless,—her eyes riveted upon the sky, her fingers clasped together. A peal of merry bells rang upon the air! and one bitter cry, one agonised burst of human feeling escaped her; and the crushed heart offered its last lingering feelings to God, and Susan Graham had no worse pang to suffer.

A long time went by. Susan sent a message to beg that she might be left alone till the breakfast was over.

At length her mother's voice was heard: "Susan, my love, may Claude and Helen say good-bye to you?"

Mrs. Graham opened the door, and showed that they were close behind her. Helen came in leaning upon her husband's arm. Her eyes were bright and full; a hidden joy, too deep for words, was in them; and Claude, graver even than his wont, seemed lingering still in some thoughts of earnest devotion, as though giving his treasure to God's keeping, from the feeling that it was too unspeakably precious for his care. Susan rose to meet them. She held Claude's hand as she kissed Helen's forehead, and her smile might have been the smile of an angel.

Helen trembled violently whilst she looked at her cousin, as though silently pleading for forgiveness, even in the midst of her happiness.

"You have been our only regret," began Claude; but he stopped; something seemed to arrest his words,—a feeling almost of awe. Susan was so thin and changed, she seemed to him standing upon the verge of the grave. His voice altered, and he added, "I did not know you had been so ill."

Susan reseated herself, but she did not answer.

Mrs. Graham interposed lightly, and spoke of indifferent

matters ; but the tone could not be kept up. Only Claude replied, and his words came with an effort. There was a struggle between present, unutterable joy, and the sense of some unknown evil.

Helen clung to him, for her limbs could scarcely support her. At length Claude roused himself, and said, gently, " We are more than friends, we are cousins now, Susan."

Susan paused — her faced was death-like. Then she said, " Yes, friends all the more, because we are cousins, Claude."

The name was faintly uttered, but Claude heard it, and his warm feelings were set free as from a spell, and he seized her hand in both his, and poured forth all the hidden gratitude and joy which he felt were due to her. Susan listened like a marble statue, and Helen's eyes filled with tears, till Mrs. Graham interrupted the burst of feeling, and said, " You must go." There was another pressure of the hand, full of all a man's cordial veneration and affection, and he left the room. Helen turned away from him as she reached the door, rushing back for one more instant, and whispered, " Kiss me once more, kiss me, and pray God to bless me."

And Susan answered quietly, and from her heart, " God bless you, dearest, and give you peace, as He has given it to me."

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

MARRIAGE is not the object of life,—only one amongst many means to its attainment. That may seem a truism ; yet we are tempted continually to forget it.

One way there is of reminding ourselves of it. It is, to accustom ourselves to study the summer of life, rather than its spring.

Most truly has it been said, —

" Sweet is the infant's waking smile,
And sweet the old man's rest ;
But middle age by no fond wile,
No soothing care is blest.

" Still in the world's hot, restless gleam,
She plies her weary task ;
While vainly for some pleasant dream,
Her wandering glances ask."

But the true work of life is carried on in this dusty and toilsome time.

The careworn, faded, unexcitable, uninteresting occupants of middle age, those are the real actors in the great drama of life. As they play their parts well, so are the young safe, and the old happy; and when we think of marriage, it is surely wise to contemplate it, not as it is when youth, in the first flush of loveliness and enthusiasm, sets forth upon its flower-strewn road; but as it will be when beauty shall have faded, and the excitement of feeling become deadened, and life shall be seen, not as the vista to an earthly Paradise, but the dangerous way, along which man is to pass to death and judgment, Heaven or Hell. And there are some facts which might, if freely considered, suffice to put middle age in a very different point of view from that in which it is usually seen. It must, if there is any thing good in the individual, tend to unselfishness, especially with women. The young girl cares for herself, her own prospects, her own hopes and fears. Life is so new to her, so engrossing, that it is only by an effort that she can throw herself into the minds of others, so as to feel real sympathy. But a mother, or an aunt, or a friend, wearied with disappointment, and pressed down by care, has ceased to live for herself. When she joys, it is because those she loves are happy; when she grieves, it is because they are suffering. Self, indeed, may and does lurk under the holiest affections, but, for the most part, God has ordained that by them we should be purified from the dross of the world, and so learn to live out of ourselves, to find our rest at last with Him.

Neither may we forget that the most prosaic mind has its history, the calmest heart its tale of sorrow. When the complexion becomes dim, and the brightness of the eyes faded; when the outline of the features is sharpened, and silver streaks mingle with the dark hair, we say it is the work of time, and forget that each line which has marred the beauty of the outward form may be but the mark of the chisel by which God has fitted the soul for Heaven.

And surely there is no period of life more inestimably precious. If angels watch the struggle of middle age, it must be with very different eyes from those of man. The stiff, unenthusiastic, saddened old maid; the nervous, anxious mother, must be to them objects of the deepest, tenderest sympathy. So much of life has been passed, so little is still to come! The work of every moment must appear unutterably important. There is no leisure now for dreams; no youthful excitability can mislead for the present; no gilded hopes can beguile for the future. Life has been met and faced in its true colours, and now it is to be closely

grappled with. God help those who are engaged in the conflict, for truly they have need of many prayers.

Helen Egerton and Susan Graham sat together in the morning-room at Helmsley. Two of Helen's children—a boy of five, and a little girl of three—were playing in a bow-window, with some toys given them by their grandpapa, who since Lady Augusta's death had resided, for the most part, at Helmsley; and in a distant part of the house were sounds of a piano, which told of the school-room, and the governess, who was superintending the education of two elder girls; whilst a letter from a young Claude, who had just begun the ordeal of the world at a public school, lay open upon the table.

The romance of life was over; it had fallen into its usual course. Helen was the useful, happy mother; Susan the gentle, kindly, unimpassioned old maid. Hundreds such are to be met with in the world, of whom it would be said: "She is an excellent mother, and she must have been lovely when she was young;" or, "She is a very nice lady-like person, but so quiet; one wonders what her life can have been."

"Shall you be ready to go out with your father, and with me, by and by?" asked Claude, suddenly opening a door which led from his own study to his wife's room. Change had come upon him also, but it was less marked than in Helen. He had never been young, and now it seemed that it would take much to make him old. In manner, perhaps in mind, he had grown younger. There was an exhilaration as well as energy in his voice; it told that doubt, and misgiving, and loneliness, were at an end; that his affections were at rest; and it was with something almost of boyish eagerness that now, instead of waiting for an answer, he came forward to receive it. It was clear that he was glad of the excuse, though he left the door open intending to return, and kept a pencil and paper in his hand, to persuade himself that he was determined to continue his business. Helen laughed, and warned him that he was longing to play truant; and he came and sat down by her chair, and took up a book which he had been reading to her the evening before, and turning over the pages, said: "One may long, but I suppose one must wait till holiday-time comes. These sunny days are great temptations." Helen turned to him with the fascinating smile of her childhood, and Claude's face became thoughtful, as some recollection, which was too sacred for words, crossed his mind; and then it brightened with unmixed gladness, as he answered: "You needn't be afraid. I am not going to be tempted. Susan would come down upon me at once if I were."

"I would trust you to yourself," said Susan; "you are so wretched if your conscience is not thoroughly satisfied."

"Yes, I must go back again to work." He stood up directly. "But we will have our drive this afternoon, Helen, and the children too. I shall have finished by that time, if magistrates' business does not keep me."

"And if parish business does not keep me," said Helen.

"And you will think of me on my journey back to Wingfield," observed Susan; "I must go and pack now."

"I should fret much more at parting with you," said Helen, "if I did not know how many will rejoice to have you at home again. Change is necessary for you, and I don't feel as if I could get on in the world without an occasional peep at you, or I should have serious qualms of conscience whenever I asked you to come to us. I can't think what all the Wingfield people do without their prime minister, and head nurse, and chief governess."

"It is very pleasant," said Susan, simply, "to feel no doubt of giving pleasure when one goes home, and the Wingfield people are very kind. Certainly there is a great deal to make one contented in this troublesome world. But then, with my dear mother, who could help being so?"

"It is more than that," said Helen. "Claude and I often say to each other that if we can only see our children like you, we shall scarcely desire any other blessing for them."

"Scarcely," repeated Claude; "not entirely." He looked at her tenderly, and added, "We are very happy."

Helen did not answer, but she put her hand within that of her husband, and the expression of trustful fondness in her face was deeper and more touching far than the first outburst of their early love.

Claude bent down and kissed her, half in affection and half in admiration. His inward gaze could see in her no change. To him she was lovely still, as on the day when first he called her his, save that the hidden beauty of the soul was exhibiting itself day by day in the outward form; and the deadened complexion and the sharpened lines of the face spoke to him only of woman's fervent affection, and her untiring spirit of self-sacrifice.

Susan looked on calmly. Years had gone by since the sight of that hallowed love could produce one momentary pang; and now she said earnestly, "When God gives it, it must be very blessed; when He withholds it, He can make up for it, fully, entirely." The last words were only partially audible, and Susan's hands were folded together, for they were followed by a prayer.

After a few seconds she spoke again more lightly. "I am not, perhaps, a judge of these things, I have so many blessings. People think me lonely because my sisters and my brother are all married, but they don't know the interests which have sprung up in consequence, and Anna's being settled near us is such a brightness to our daily life, giving us others to live for and to love. Life can never be dreary when one knows that there are so many who would grieve if one were taken from it."

"And your mother?" said Claude, eagerly.

"Yes, my mother;" — but Susan's countenance slightly changed as she added, "I often think how she has been spared to help me through so large a portion of my life; and when we shall be parted, she has taught me how to live without her. It can be but for a few years."

"You remember that more constantly than we do," said Claude, gravely.

"I suppose we have all some special difficulty in our position," said Susan. "Perhaps the trial of single life may be rightly to remember earth, and that of married life, not to forget heaven."

"And different training may be required for different characters, I suppose," said Helen. She hesitated a little, and added, as though touching upon some doubtful, forbidden subject, "I could not have lived your life, Susan, I was not strong enough for it."

"Helen needs sunshine," said Claude; "in that, Susan, she is very different from you." He held his wife's hand in his, but his eye rested upon Susan with the gaze of reverent affection and trust which had once exercised such a fatal influence over her.

Susan paused for an instant; then a smile of inward peace brightened her sweet calm face; and, as she gently laid her own hand upon those of Claude and Helen, she said: "I have my ideal of the safest happiness in this world. Let me live in shade and look upon sunshine, and I am quite content."

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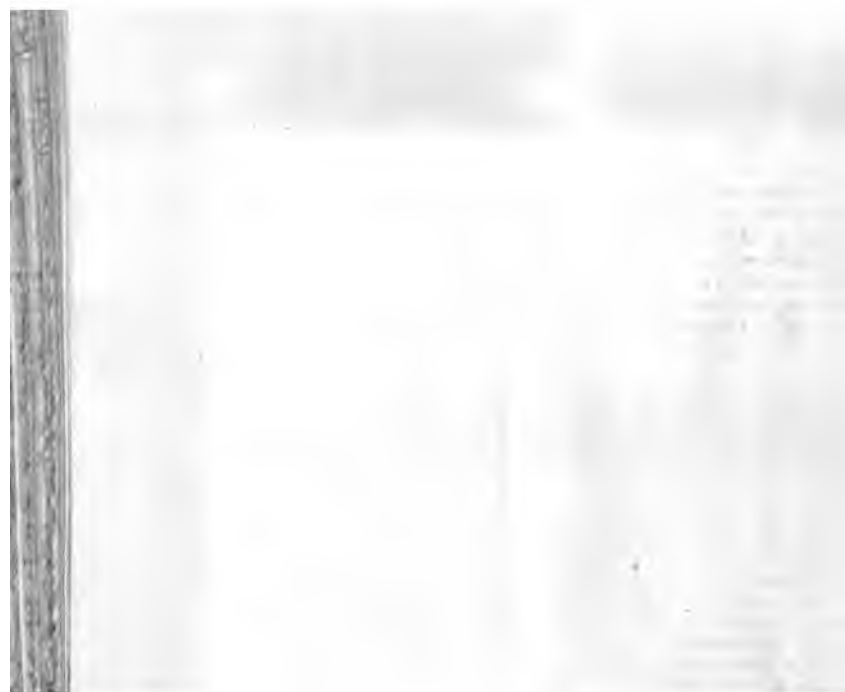
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